

Refugee Week 2008, June 15 - 21

World Refugee Day, Friday June 20, 2008

The theme for Refugee Week in Australia this year is "A Place to Call Home".

Australia's Refugee Week theme of "A Place to Call Home" encourages people to think about the global themes of protection and human rights by focusing on the fundamental right to a secure place to call home. It encourages Australians to think about our common obligations to people who have no secure home, as well as to acknowledge the 700,000 refugees and humanitarian migrants over the past 60 years who have made Australia their home.

RESOURCES

The **Social Action Office** www.sao.clriq.org.au is a source of information helpful for schools and parishes. There are some really good ideas relating to Aboriginal Reconciliation and Refugee Week.

The Social Action Office is based in Queensland so much of the news and actions for justice are locally based. However, much of the material can be used elsewhere. Contact: sao.admin@sao.clriq.org.au

Another excellent source of information is the **Refugee Council of Australia** website www.refugeecouncil.org.au

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www.refugeecouncil.org.au/newsevents/refugeeweek.html

The Refugee Council of Australia's kit includes a vast amount of information and numerous multimedia references. It also states that the largest groups of refugees around the world identified by UNHCR at the beginning of 2007 were from the following countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Viet Nam, Turkey, Angola and Myanmar.

Download the Refugee Week Kit:
www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/refugeeweek/Refugee%20Week%20Resource%20Kit%202008.pdf

Download the Refugee Week Poster:
www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/refugeeweek/Refugee%20Week%202008%20Poster%20Final.pdf

Information about issues related to refugees can also be found at **Faith Doing Justice**, www.faithdoingjustice.com.au/index.php

IMMIGRATION POLICY CHANGES

We are very pleased that the Government has abolished Temporary Protection Visas. Below are quotes from human rights and refugee advocate groups.

"The Temporary Protection Visa policy has created an unjust two-tiered system for refugees and has caused undue suffering and distress for many people trying to escape persecution." (Commissioner Innes, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, May 14, 2008)

www.humanrights.gov.au/about/media/media_releases/2008/56_08.html

"No one will lament the end of the TPV regime, a clearly failed policy which damaged the mental health of refugees needing protection and left vulnerable families separated for years." (Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia, May 13, 2008)

www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/releases/2008/080513_TPV_abolition.pdf

"With this change to abolish TPVs, refugees can start to put their past behind them and build positive futures as permanent members of the Australian community. We applaud this move by the (Rudd) Government to live up to their promises." (Kate Gauthier National Co-ordinator, A Just Australia, May 13, 2008)

www.ajustaustralia.com/mediareleases_latest_view.php?id=1CC5200A-2289-97A2-9B9F359C89E5FB8D

A personal note from Sister Claudette Cusack RSM

In the past few days we have shared the joy of some long-term detainees as they received their permanent visas. At last they can begin to rebuild their lives. One of them sent this email:

"Dear friends,

This is to inform you all that immigration Minister has considered my case & gave me permanent resident visa until police & character check are concluded. This would have been impossible without your unflinching support which include letters to Minister, moral support, financial support just to mention a few!

Thank you very much, I really appreciate you all. I am short of words to describe how amazing you are to me! Thank you all once again."

(Name omitted for privacy reasons)

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VILLAWOOD DETENTION CENTRE

Sister Lorraine Phelan RSM, one of the Mercies who visits Villawood gives us a glimpse into the detention centre in New South Wales.

“Villawood is now the largest detention centre on mainland Australia and holds approximately 250-265 detainees at any given time. There are still some men and women who have been in detention for longer than two years, some for six years.

“The Villawood Detention Centre is located in suburban Sydney in the old Migrant Hostel in which was built following World War II. It is physically unattractive, surrounded by barbed-wire and the facilities are greatly in need of an upgrade. You would have seen that money has been set-aside in the current Budget for improvements or for the re-building of Villawood.

“Sister Cecilia Rowe RSM and I visit the Villawood Detention Centre on a weekly basis. We endeavour to give support and assistance to those who seek it. This help includes pastoral support, ensuring that detainees are connected where possible to someone ‘on the outside’.

“We take note of the general well being of those in the various Stages and follow up with the professionals if necessary, bringing to the attention of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the impact of detention on particular individuals.

“Being in Villawood, for whatever reason, has the same effect on all who are detained; they do not know how long they are to be there, they have little to do besides minimal English classes, or the use of a computer for an hour or less if lucky. If they are really lucky someone may come and visit them in the afternoon.

“Last week I was able to be instrumental in the early return to her country of origin, an extremely distressed young woman who had been detained the previous evening.

“While the new Labor Government has made some changes in relation to the Australian Policy in regard to detention centres, there is still a long way to go in finding different options. We need to be constantly educating the parliamentarians on what happens inside Immigration Detention Centres.”

ACTION

If you live in Sydney and would like to visit Villawood contact Lorraine or Cecilia on Ph: (02) 9564 1911 or Email: mwiproq@mercy.org.au

Maybe you could ask your local Federal or State members about conditions for asylum seekers at Villawood?

If you are unsure of who your MP is, go to www.aph.gov.au/house/members For members of the Senate go to www.aph.gov.au/senate/senators

These pages will allow you to access all current members. You can even see their photos.

Villawood Detention Centre consists of four stages: Stage 1 is equivalent to maximum security in Prisons; Stage 2 is for couples and single men who are not likely to be disruptive; Stage 3 is for single males and Lima for single women.

There is also a Housing Settlement complex on the same site. Among those detained are:

- ✦ Asylum seekers;
- ✦ Visa over-stayers or those who have broken the conditions of their visas;
- ✦ Ex-Prisoners awaiting deportation.

Often the people in the latter categories have wives and children who have Australian residency and or citizenship and who are living in the community. This situation creates huge heartaches for all concerned. It is a constant sadness to witness the breakdown in health, particularly mental health, of individuals who have been detained over a long period. There is a helplessness in not being able to change this in any effective way.

CHRISTMAS ISLAND DETENTION CENTRE

One of our current concerns is the ongoing construction of an enormously expensive new detention complex on remote Christmas Island. In 2005 it was estimated that it would cost \$336 million to build. Running costs would also be exorbitant. From a description given by a recent visitor to the site, it will house 400 detainees with the possibility of another 400 if necessary. So far no one has been detained at the Centre. There is one Indonesian couple with two children who are being detained in Community Detention on the Island. Two young Vietnamese men have been moved to Perth. The site is under construction at enormous expense and one has to ask, “Why?”

Surely if a catastrophe occurred resulting in hundreds of people seeking asylum or protection from Australia, why would we house them on remote Christmas Island?

Could this response be borne of fear?

Compared to on-shore detention, how accessible will real support be for these people. We know from experi-

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ence at Baxter how crucial friendship, advocacy, legal and psychological assistance were to the asylum seekers. A visit to Christmas Island is quite impossible for most supporters.

Is there another response that we as a nation could consider?

Is there another response that would be more akin to the Gospel?

It might be a good idea to ask your Federal or State representatives for their views on this matter. For contact details refer to the article on Villawood.

Lately the Christmas Island Detention Centre has been the subject of questions in Parliament and in the Q&A series on ABC TV.

The description of the Detention Centre being built on Christmas Island confirms our fears that it will simply duplicate the conditions that existed at Baxter and lead to the same mental and physical health problems that asylum seekers have experienced in the past.

The new detention centre on the north-western end of the Island, about 15 km from the Eastern end where most of the 1000 locals live.

There are five accommodation blocks – red, white, blue, green and gold. Red has 20 rooms for detainees in maximum security. The other blocks have accommodation for about 95. The centre is therefore being built to hold 400 detainees, with a contingency plan for a further 400. This contingency plan would be achieved by converting recreation areas in each block into further accommodation. It should be noted that there will always be a large recreational area in the centre of the complex containing sporting facilities (including a swimming pool). These facilities are already in use by the construction staff.

The large kitchen will provide both Hallal and non-Hallal food. Food will be conveyed to serving areas in each accommodation block.

The gold block was originally intended for families in detention. As the policy has been changed to exclude families with children from detention, this block will not be used for the original purpose. Community housing for families will be constructed elsewhere on the Island.

The need to transport workers and materials from Australia and the cost of construction is very, very expensive – currently \$336 million and rising.

The following points should be noted about the detention centre under construction:

- ✦ Although it is still a detention centre, every effort is being made to provide for the physical comfort of detainees. Naturally there will be air-conditioning in all areas. The hot, humid climate would demand this.
- ✦ Christmas Island is somewhat inaccessible for per-

sonnel providing services to detainees (including providers of pastoral care). There are only three flights per week (two by National Jet, a subsidiary of Qantas, from Perth, and one from Singapore), with the fare costing \$1920 return from Perth (with the possibility of a cheaper Apex fare of about \$1750 and \$1160 return from Singapore).

- ✦ The difficulty of providing off-shore pastoral workers is somewhat offset by the generous readiness of many of the 1000 Christmas Island residents to assist detainees. But, while some of them may get employment at the new centre, the majority will only be able to help voluntarily as well as attending to their regular work.
- ✦ The centre should be commissioned later this year, but then it will very likely be immediately decommissioned (put “on hold”).

ACTION

Friends of the Earth Australia need your help to urge the new Australian government to take responsibility for climate refugees. www.foei.org/en/get-involved/take-action/climate-refugees

HOPE: an inspiring story

Hope is an inspiring story. A film that works on many levels, it is a universal tale of family, migration and the search for “a better life”.

***400 people set out on a boat.
Only 7 made it to Australia.
Amal Basry was one of them...***

Hope is screening at Cinemas from mid June for a limited period; it is believed that early interest by patrons will encourage cinemas to extend the screening period. www.hopedocumentary.com.au/hope

From: Specific Issues Committee, Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Sisters Sally Bradley, Claudette Cusack, Geraldine Mugavin and Lorraine Phelan). The Committee warmly invites your response to the article or the issue.

Email: asylum.refugees@mercy.org.au

Contact: Carmel Heagerty RSM, Institute Justice Co-ordinator

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