

## **Visiting Members of Parliament about the Treatment of Asylum Seekers in Australia**

If you are concerned about the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia, please join us in telling your Member of Parliament about it.

Recently a few of us visited the offices of a number of federal MPs about the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia. Some of our concerns arise from our visits to immigration detention centres and so we have been particularly raising concerns about the mandatory detention policy and the very long time it is taking to assess refugee claims. The resounding message to us is that if we want things to improve in regards to the treatment of asylum seekers, MPs need to hear about it.

The best way to tell MPs about it is, of course, to visit them. If this is not possible, the next best way is to post them a letter.

So...if you agree that the process of detaining asylum seekers is wrong, it would be great if you could arrange a visit to your local federal MP. You can find details of the local offices of all MPs here: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/members/mi-alpha.asp>.

If you would like someone to go with you, please contact Caroline Fleay – [c.fleay@curtin.edu.au](mailto:c.fleay@curtin.edu.au) – she can arrange for someone to accompany you who knows the issues. If you are not in WA, we will investigate options.

### **What are the issues relating to mandatory detention?**

- Mandatory detention is a policy whereby asylum seekers arriving by boat are detained in detention centres until their refugee claims are processed. Australia has had a mandatory detention policy since 1992. This has meant that thousands of asylum seekers have been detained for months and sometimes years, including children.
- The great majority of people detained in Australia's immigration detention centres are here as a result of being pushed out of their country of origin through war or persecution at home. Some examples include the conflicts in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Iraq, and the persecution of the Hazara ethnic group in Afghanistan (coupled with the war).
- Asylum seekers are detained for an indefinite period of time as they have no idea when their refugee claims (and the granting of a visa to stay in Australia) will be processed. The indefinite nature of the detention means already vulnerable people are made more vulnerable, with their lives on hold for an indeterminate period of time.
- This policy is inhumane. Many reports produced by parliamentary inquiries, the UN and human rights organisations have concluded that mandatory detention has serious and negative effects on the mental health of asylum seekers.
- The policy breaks international law, as it is arbitrary, non-reviewable and discriminates against people for their mode of arrival regardless of the legitimacy of their claim. People who arrive by air who then claim asylum are not generally detained.

- Detention centres that house the greatest number of asylum seekers are in remote locations - Christmas Island, Curtin (near Derby), Leonora, and Scherger (near Weipa). This isolation means there are fewer services, few visitors and less access to torture and trauma counselling.
- Mandatory detention is expensive – new centres are being built and current centres expanded. The Christmas Island immigration detention centre cost over \$400 million to build and costs more than \$30 million per year to run. According to the 2010–2011 budget estimate, the Curtin immigration detention centre will require almost \$100 million to operate this year. Serco, the agency contracted to manage the centres, is a British based firm which runs prisons, hospitals and detention centres around the world. Its management of places of detention is attracting growing criticism.
- Despite the federal government's announcement last October that all children would be removed from immigration detention centres by June 2011, many children continue to be detained where they and their families may not feel safe. This can place further strain on traumatised asylum seekers.
- Mandatory detention has a significant impact on local communities. Often the presence of a detention centre will increase local employment and bring money into the community for the purchasing of goods and services. However, it also increases rents – often dramatically – and creates a shortage of services. For example, in Derby (near Curtin) rents are now on average about \$600-700 per week and many of the local tradespeople are now working on the expansion of the centre and are therefore unavailable for local work. In addition, security staff at Curtin are on a fly-in fly-out basis so there is only limited local employment at the detention centre.
- In addition, the issue can be divisive in local communities. Any local community will typically have those who support the rights of asylum seekers and those who do not. In communities which may already be facing some degree of social stress and where community harmony is paramount to positive community building, the location of detention centres in the area may add to this stress and inhibit community cohesion.

**And there are alternatives to mandatory detention – Australia does not have to lock up asylum seekers while their claims are being processed.**

Asylum seekers should only be detained for a minimum period for security and health checks. They should then be free to live in our communities until their refugee claims are assessed. This is not only a much cheaper option than the millions of dollars currently spent on immigration detention centres, it is also humane.

For more information on alternatives to mandatory detention, see *The Better Way: Refugees, Detention and Australian*, produced by the Justice for Asylum Seekers network: <http://www.apo.org.au/research/better-way-refugees-detention-and-australians>

**Further information can also be found in these reports:**

Asylum Seekers and Refugees – What are the Facts? Parliament House Library:  
<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bn/sp/AsylumFacts.pdf>

A Just Australia's Myths and Facts about Asylum Seekers:  
[http://www.ajustaustralia.com/informationandresources\\_newsandanalysis.php?act=student\\_kits&id=29](http://www.ajustaustralia.com/informationandresources_newsandanalysis.php?act=student_kits&id=29)

Myths and Facts. ACT Refugee Rights Committee:  
<http://www.refugeeaction.org/downloads/Myths&FactsMarch2011.pdf>

Mandatory Detention. Amnesty International:  
[http://www.amnesty.org.au/images/uploads/ref/Mandatory\\_detention-March09.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org.au/images/uploads/ref/Mandatory_detention-March09.pdf)

Department of Immigration and Citizenship Fact Sheet on Immigration Detention  
<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/82detention.htm#i>

Other issues you may like to find out more about include:

- The long delays in processing claims and then once refugee status is acknowledged, delays in getting security clearances which means that asylum seekers are held in detention for even longer periods.
- The demonisation of asylum seekers.
- Political point scoring in relation to “Stop the Boats” and people smuggling.
- Longer term solutions to asylum seeking and displacement.

**If you would like to talk to us about any of this, that would be great. Let us know!**

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## **Sending a Letter to your Member of Parliament**

If a letter is more your style, or getting a meeting with your local MP is not happening, here is a proforma. It is better to post a letter to an MP – it can make more of an impact than an email.

Dear .....

I am writing to you to register my disapproval of the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia, particularly in relation to mandatory detention. As my local Member of Parliament, I would like you to communicate my concern to the Minister for Immigration and the Prime Minister. I disapprove of mandatory detention for the following reasons:

- The policy is inhumane. It is well documented that mandatory detention has serious and negative effects on the mental health of asylum seekers and there are increasing instances of self-harm among asylum seekers.
- Asylum seekers are detained for an indefinite period of time as they have no idea when their claims for asylum will be processed. The indefinite nature of the detention means already vulnerable people are made more vulnerable, unable to plan their future.
- The policy breaks international law, as it is arbitrary, non-reviewable and discriminates against people for their mode of arrival regardless of the legitimacy of their claim.
- Detention centres housing the greatest number of asylum seekers are in remote locations – Christmas Island, Curtin (near Derby), Leonora and Scherger (near Weipa). This isolation means there are fewer services, few visitors and less access to torture and trauma counselling.
- Mandatory detention is expensive – new centres are being built and current centres are being expanded. The Christmas Island immigration detention centre cost over \$400 million to build and requires more than \$30 million per year to run. According to the 2010–2011 budget estimate, the Curtin immigration detention centre will require almost \$100 million to operate this year. Serco, the agency contracted to manage the centres, is a British based firm which runs prisons, hospitals and detention centres around the world. Its management of places of detention is attracting growing criticism.
- Despite the federal government's announcement last October that all children would be removed from immigration detention centres by June 2011, many children continue to be detained where they and their families may not feel safe. This can place further strain on traumatised asylum seekers.
- Mandatory detention impacts on local communities. Although the presence of a detention centre may increase local employment and bring money into the community for the purchasing of goods and services, it also increases rents (often dramatically) and creates a shortage of services.

- In addition, the issue can be divisive in local communities. Any local community will typically have those who support the rights of asylum seekers and those who do not. In communities which may already be facing some degree of social stress and where community harmony is paramount to positive community building, the location of detention centres in the area may add to this stress and inhibit community cohesion.
- There are alternatives to mandatory detention. Asylum seekers should only be detained for a minimum period for security and health checks. They should then be free to live in our communities until their asylum claims are assessed. This is not only a much cheaper option than the millions of dollars currently spent on immigration detention centres, but it is also humane.

I acknowledge there are large numbers of refugees seeking protection throughout the world. I urge the Australian government to initiate and support international solutions that will reduce the need for asylum seekers to flee persecution, and ensure those that do are given asylum. We must also remember that Australia continues to receive very few asylum seekers in comparison to many other countries. Those that do reach our shores deserve our protection and I encourage politicians to seek to work in a bipartisan manner on these issues.

I look forward to hearing from you and look forward to a more humane response from all political parties on this issue.

Yours sincerely