

Senate Select Committee on the recent allegations relating to conditions and circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru

I write this submission to urge the government to reconsider the release of children held in detention in Nauru. Submissions from the Select Committee provide an opportunity to highlight the ongoing human rights concerns identified by those that have worked in the detention centre on Nauru.

In December 2014, I was invited by International Health & Medical Services (IHMS) to accompany Professor David Isaacs to Nauru. I am a registered nurse with over 12 years' experience in refugee health, both in the UK and Australia. I coordinate a refugee health screening service in a Children's Hospital and due to our knowledge and understanding of this area of health, we were asked to provide consultations on some of the children and families there and to recommend ways that IHMS could improve their health care systems.

I am the only nurse that I am aware of that has spoken out publically about the conditions on Nauru. Having spent nearly a week on Nauru treating patients, observing how they are treated by the people that are employed to work there and the conditions they are forced to endure day in and day out was gruelling and exhausting. Through the many hours and long days that we spent working with these families, it became clear that there is a deepening human rights crisis going on in this offshore processing centre. Violations to the rights to a life of freedom, education and health, the right of expression and rights to the freedom of torture are all intensifying and continuing. The people being held in Nauru detention facility have no way of exercising their civil and political rights as well as their social, economic, cultural and religious beliefs.

There is no doubt that a cycle of abuse and torture exists both from the governmental policy that keeps them there right down the chain to the workers that loom over them day and night as they try to muster up every piece of courage they have to keep going for themselves and their children.

Nauru has a dark, chilling feeling of lawlessness about it, a feeling that you can behave as inappropriately as you wish, with no respect or regard for anyone and there will be no one to answer to and no repercussions or punishment for your actions. The Transfield guards are always large human beings that tower over you. Many are rude and talk with no respect or dignity; they verbally and physically abuse the detainees (not a term that I like to use, but one that is commonly used in Nauru).

Professor Isaacs and I were treating one baby with Typhoid in one of the consultation rooms in the IHMS medical centre. The Father was waiting at the end of the corridor, so I decided to go and get him. I went and asked the man to follow me and suddenly one of the Transfield guards assaulted the dad by pushing him up the corridor shouting at him "I told you to get up there". No one questioned the guard, no one except me of course. The behaviour was accepted by all that witnessed it. I found myself apologising profusely for the abuse that this man had encountered, abuse that I had no part in. He just accepted it and said it was "okay". I looked into his eyes and they screamed sadness. Not anger or feelings of revenge just a deep look of complete helplessness.

A few days later we were asked to attend the Republic of Nauru Hospital to assess some families that were living in the community. When we returned to the IHMS medical centre in the camp at 6pm, there were children booked to see us; they had been waiting since 1pm with no food. We started seeing the patients and of course it was getting later and later and the children were becoming more and more hungry, agitated and tired. I asked the guards if they could help by going to the mess to get some meals for the remaining children, to which I got a flat "no". I pleaded with them stating the obvious, that these were only children and needed to get some food in their tummies. The children and their parents looked to me with a mixture of both sorrow and that same look that I saw in the father I witnessed getting assaulted, helplessness. These parents couldn't even get a bite to eat for their children. I refused to let this happen, I couldn't allow these children to be starved of a meal just because the Transfield guards refused to get them one. I ran to the mess and begged the

cook to give me four meals for our patients and he agreed. It is evident there is nowhere for families to get food when the mess closes. Children are not like adults and don't always understand the importance of scheduled meal times. Parents don't have anywhere to access food, apart from in the mess at the scheduled times. Some of the mothers are too scared to go to the mess and can't get food for their children near to their tents.

The guards also regularly chew chewing gum and eat sweets in front of the children, knowing that they can't have any. This teases and upsets them and they become upset with their parents for not being able to provide them with these treats.

Asylum seekers were referred to by boat number and not their name. When asked why, they replied "because there are too many Mohammad's". I replied that we have many John Smiths in Australia but we get round this minor problem by asking a surname and date of birth. By not referring to people by their name removes an identity. It's very difficult to identify and relate to if they don't have a name. Once you place a name on a human being it becomes far more difficult to disregard them. This is all part of the process of dehumanisation.

The deplorable human rights situation in the jail, and let's be honest it's nothing more than a jail, is evident from the structure. Asylum seekers especially women and children are extremely vulnerable every minute of every day that they spend there, they are powerless victims. And through no fault of their own, the risk of assault and abuse is increased by the current structural issues in the living quarters and the conditions that the asylum seekers are expected to tolerate.

If you have ever visited Nauru you will know that is extremely hot. The sun is beats down heavily, making you feel tired and lethargic. The prison camp has been erected in the centre of the Island where all the phosphate mines were, making it extremely dusty and there is very little shade to hide burning skin. The tents all line up next to one another making privacy almost non-existent. There is mould on the interior canvas of non-air-conditioned tents and these tents are unbearably hot. The tents have no running water. The families do have access to the 10 litre bottled water station in the canteen. However, there is no place near their tents where families can access bottled water after dark.

The shower blocks are 30-120 meters from their tents and women are often too scared to walk there after dark. One mother we met had begun bed wetting. We often see children that bed wet due to the trauma, but we were both deeply shocked to meet an adult that was also bed wetting. She explained she was just too scared to leave her tent and couldn't hold on any longer. Another mother had to place her mattress out on the dusty path to dry, as her child had been wetting the bed. She was ashamed and embarrassed as everybody could see what she was doing. She had no way of washing the mattress, so one can only imagine how badly the mattress smelt after repeated urine saturation. Another mother had been menstruating for over two months; she was using clothes and pieces of material from her tent to hold the bleeding as she had no access to sanitary towels. The bleeding was so bad that one night she had to brave the journey to the toilet to clean herself. As she walked past the male guards a blood clot fell to the ground. A continual trail of blood followed her all the way to the toilet. She wept as she told me this story

In the family wing of the camp, a block of showers has been built for mothers and their babies to wash. About 7-10 meters from the shower block, a table has been positioned where the security guards sit. During our visit, there were two male security guards sitting behind the table and one sitting on top. The table is at a 90 degree angle to the shower block and the guards can see directly into the showers. The shower blocks have no doors, all that is provided is a flimsy curtain that hangs in the doorway and the women are expected to shower there. Women also have to wash their babies in these showers and find it difficult to hold their child and the curtain closed at the same time. The curtain often blows open allowing the male guards to see them. One mother we met was offered more time in the showers if she gave the guard sexual favours. The same woman cried on my

shoulder as she told me that she had been raped there.

Mobile phones and cameras are forbidden in the camp and taken from you when you enter. Why is there such a code of secrecy? If this is a policy that is fair in its approach and there is nothing to hide then why not support a code transparency instead. Why are Journalists charged \$8000 to enter and the fee doesn't always guarantee their entrance?

The international community are horrified by Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, however, our politicians talk proudly at length about how they have "stopped the boats and people are no longer drowning". They portray themselves as heroes, but these same heroes put children in prison camps indefinitely with no way of ever leaving. They will spend an entire lifetime in prison without ever having committed a crime. Their guardians, the government of Australia places them at repeated risk of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, because they believe they it will win them votes. Votes are won by injecting a fear of asylum seekers into the public, but this fear may breed hatred in many, which won't do Australia any favours in the long run.

There is widespread evidence to support that detaining children cause's harm. We believe the conditions on Nauru endanger the physical and psychological health of children in the short- and long-term. I advocate that holding adults and children in detention facilities is unacceptable and condemn this practice. I support the immediate release of all children and their families from Nauru and for them to be processed in the community in Australia. A country which I know is fair-minded and compassionate.

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