



## **Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy**

CARAD welcomes the opportunity to respond briefly to the Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of December 2010: we can only usefully respond to the matter of “the after-incident support provided to survivors”.

After our experiences with injured survivors in Perth [and with men from the previous boat explosion] CARAD recommends that information content and channels to them, to their families, to their advocates and between agencies must be better managed so as to minimise further distress following any future disaster.

CARAD is a non-government agency established eleven years ago to provide settlement and related services to refugees who held a Temporary Protection Visa.

The current roles of CARAD include:

- agency of last resort for persons who have applied for protection and hold a bridging visa
- home tuition for school-children and for parents [State Govt. funded and supported]
- visiting, advocacy and referral services for asylum seekers in detention centres - for the most part in Perth, though shortly to include a remote IDC.

Some survivors of the ship wreck were brought to Perth for medical treatment that would extend over the forthcoming Christmas break, so CARAD established a roster of volunteers to visit and to provide necessary support and essential items to people in hospital and the IDC. We were assured by a senior DIAC manager that CARAD was welcome to visit these places and that he would convey this to SERCO.

### **Need for reliable information**

The complex levels of care that people needed after this tragedy are not elaborated here. However a major need of the survivors was for reliable information about their loved ones: this was not always forthcoming; for example.

- a front page story in the West Australian indicated that a woman needing to know the fate of her husband and son was advised by a DIAC officer to ring the DIAC hot line. CARAD took up this claim with DIAC but because it took DIAC some days to refute it distress had been caused.
- as late as February a person on Christmas Island was asked by a woman detained there with her daughter if we were able to trace her husband who she believed to be alive. He was listed as ‘missing’ and she sent a photograph. This woman claimed that DIAC would not tell her the names of people who had been transferred to Perth. CARAD could not find this man.

- another woman, a relative of a person she knew to be on the SIEV 221, contacted CARAD with her concern and the man's details in early January. CARAD contacted DIAC on her behalf and she was told by DIAC that

*"The Australian Government has established a hotline to assist families and community members - 1300 724 010. I am unable to confirm whether your relative has survived or not as the disaster victim identification process is still underway and there are identity clarifications for a number of people that are yet to be finalised.*

*At the moment the delivery of information regarding deaths is being managed by the Australian Federal Police in cooperation with the Western Australian Coroner, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship is only providing services to those people who are now subject to immigration processing.*

*I regret that I cannot deliver immediate news to assist you, however if you find that the hotline does not assist you, please re contact me and I will be happy to provide any further support to you in finding the correct channels for an answer."*

While providing some information as to how the overall problems were being addressed by Government it does not speak to the needs of the inquirer. It is difficult to think that a 'hotline' could provide any fuller information.

#### **Information needs of individuals visited and for whom CARAD advocated.**

Although CARAD volunteers visited ten people brought to Perth for treatment, these two cases illustrate shared concerns.

1 A man and wife whose child aged 3 ½ years was presumed to have died were understandably traumatised and waited a long time for any kind of information about their daughter; the wife required medication and both received counselling. They lived in community detention.

Their assessments mirrored those of others and provide an insight into how different agencies work to different requirements, even in the same organisation. Our visitors were concerned that adding to the continuing distress of this couple were repeated visits from Federal Police Officers who questioned and re-questioned them together and separately, once taking 12 hours from 9.00am. They said the police asked the same questions at each interview. The visitors noted that this could only enhance the raw grief of bereft parents. CARAD approached DIAC asking that all SIEV 221 clients interviews by the AFP be brought to a close and that DIAC interviews proceed as there had been a publicised commitment that the survivors would be given priority processing.

DIAC responded by saying the AFP had advised that their interviews related to the identification of the bodies, then to the coroner's inquiries and then to the criminal investigation. They had said that they were aware of the stress involved and were being as sensitive as possible with the clients. Further it was also said that refugee status assessments were progressing. Even though interpreters were provided this pair had not realised the distinctions between AFP interviews and the interview to make their claim for protection.

2 Two young men were brought for medical treatment after the ship wreck. One had a younger brother detained at Christmas Island; they were both distressed at the separation and made requests to be reunited. CARAD made strong representations to DIAC for the brothers to be together [but not at Christmas Island] once the older one had finished medical treatment. One of the issues that heightened their separation was that neither could ring the other directly—there was no number for Christmas Island and the Perth based man had to wait for the other to ring him with claims that messages were not always passed on.

DIAC was asked by CARAD to ensure the two were reunited, and in part the response said . Where he will be transferred depends on capacity and pressures at the time, but the issues you have raised will be considered in the decision to transfer and place him” Options were likely to be Curtin, Darwin ---- or Christmas Island. It was a pleasing outcome that the young brother was flown from Christmas Island to Perth before they were both taken to Darwin next day.

The other young man however was transferred without any prior notice: after a late night he was woken at 6am and taken to the airport without any time to change or say goodbyes, but apparently to a community detention facility in NSW.

Rosemary Hudson Miller  
Chairperson - CARAD

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