

Submission No. 110
Date Received

Committee Secretary  
I.S. Con Migration.  
Dept. of House of Rep's.  
P.O. Box 6021.  
Parliament House.  
Canberra A.C.T. 2600.

7/8/08.

RECEIVED  
12 AUG 2008  
BY: MIG

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find enclosed my submission on Detention/Migration for which I was granted an extension.

I hope its not too long, there was a lot more I could have written. However I found the process very emotional.

I pray this dark part of our history is over but not forgotten. I would also like to thank members of Political parties & Lawyers for their support. Their willingness to put their views across even against party lines & popular opinion. Lawyers & public servants who gave free advice & took cases to court & made public aware of situation. I thank best for those who helped.  
Sincerely yours.

Beulah Ruenn.

## Submission into the Immigration Detention in Australia

First impression Auschwitz-Birenu. Is this really my country Australia, who built this maximum security goal for asylum seekers? Electronically operated gates & cameras welcomed refugees and visitors alike. Not a goal! With numbers assigned to refugees. Visitors were also given a wrist band with a number after signed in and producing ID. This had to be collected, cut off wrist, after each visit even children and babies were allocated them. All bags and valuables were secured in lockers. The visitors were then escorted across the dirt to the main gate where a guard would press a button and speak into an intercom. "Visitors" gate would open and we'd walk into the race. At the other end a door would be opened and 5 visitors at a time would be shown in. Their bags carrying food, fruit and drinks etc would be placed onto X-ray machine and check to ensure all were sealed. After being wanded bags were given back and we'd be escorted over to the visitors centre where guard would once again speak into intercom before the door would be opened and we'd be in a small observation room. A door at the other side would open at a press of a button then visitors would be in a narrow hallway. Pressing another button would allow visitors into the main area where tables and chairs were. I waited nervously to meet my friend's young Afghani friend who would give me names of those who did not receive visitors. The three main groups at Baxter initially were from Iran, Iraqi and Afghanistan. I obtained a list of 400 names of asylum seekers. Most visitors visited with families and woman so I chose to visit males who had no one. I then wrote to over 40 enclosing a stamped addressed envelope telling them a little of myself and family. I asked if they would like to meet me so began my years of visits, learning about other cultures and making life long friendship.

As you were only allowed to visit four people at a time I would spend a week at Port Augusta attending the three visit times a day, I did this for 1 year before obtaining my own car.

Initially it was difficult due to the language barrier however that was overcome by playing games and me trying to speak Farsi or Dari. This caused much laughter. I will always remember an older Afghani man who's limited English was "Mom coffee?" It was often a race to see who could make my coffee. It was the only sign of hospitality they could show us. I had never drank so many cups of coffee before.

While times were set down for visiting it would sometimes be an hour before our friends were shown in. They'd glare at the guards and complain to us that they were told we were not there even when they knew we were always on time. So valuable time was lost calming down our friends. The children would run outside to the lawn area and play coming back to the tables to get a bite to eat or a hug. It was so hard to see these lovely children in such a dreadful place. To watch their parents trying to keep things normal and putting on a brave face for us visitors. Many tears were shed at each parting with promises to be back as soon as we could and to write to the government to release them. What crime had they committed to be locked up for years? "To seek freedom in a Christian Country". Many were too ashamed to let their families know they were in this goal. One of the hardest events I witnessed was mothers bringing back new babies from hospital, where guards were present not husbands at this special time. How these babies brought such joy to the compounds. One little girl after 3 years in detention and who was released along with her parents on a Bridging Visa could not relate to other children on

the outside for a long time. Mum was worried when she was expecting again as all their expenses had to be paid by friends. However at least this one would be born outside the wire. He is now 3 years old. Mum and Dad were professionals in Iran before they escaped.

I learned to cook their favourite meals, who liked what and who could not eat what. It was often a juggling act when filling in my form to visit. There would be request for friend from other compounds to come across so they could meet and chat or I don't sleep at night so please put me in afternoon or night.

As my son was keen on soccer and we'd watch the overseas games I found that was a big help spending time with my friends.

It was wonderful to meet other like minded people from all over Australia who drove, flew caught buses, trains for hundreds of kilometres to visit these wonderful people. We became support for each other boosting each other up when our visits had not gone well. When there had been bad news from home or the war had commenced in Iraq. I remember one polite young Iranian man who organised a collection amongst the compound for victims of an earthquake back home. They did not have much but they put in as much of their Baxter dollars (money earned by doing jobs around the compounds) He put a list up in the visitor's centre.

Another time I spent listening to a well educated professional young man from Iran telling me not to visit him. After 3 years of seeing me he'd just wanted to get out and buy me a coffee on the outside. I hate it here. Do not come again

The Government came up with a "wonderful" scheme to encourage asylum seekers to return home whether it was safe or not. That was to offer an incentive of money. Some of my friends who had been in Curtain then Woomera then Baxter had, had enough and said they would go before they were completely mad, One from Iraq was able to get word back to me and who's family I had contacted there was taken to the Jordanian Border and left. He was given 24 hours to leave or be locked up. His next stop was Syria where he did end up in goal and I believe has since died. He was just one of the many who was "returned" and never heard from again. Another was a young man; group of us talked him out of accepting that offer. He'd been 5 years in detention and wanted out. He did withdraw and was lucky to be assisted by the Red Cross to get a Humanitarian Permanent Visa. He went to Pakistan where his wife had waited for 6 years and brought her to Australia where they now have a son. He has worked hard since his release also helping his country men on their release to find work.

At times I'd receive a frantic phone call so and so is in Red 1 (the compound which did not exist) I am sure all of you remember the famous case of C.R. The number of phone calls I received about her situation from the males who were also in that compound at the same time who were concerned about this lady who should not be here.

The care that was shown to their fellow detainees helped them through the bad times. I'll never forget the sense of humour some showed towards the medical centre. It was a well known fact that Panadol/Panimax was given out for everything from migraine to toothache stomach pains etc. A young Afghani told me during our visit that he'd gone across and asked the nurse for 2 panimax toilet was blocked. He still had a sense of humour.

The good news was always bitter sweet for detainees as friends got visas, some had been in less time but they were always happy to see them released. There were many tears shed when the 'Courts' knocked back a claim and depression set in.

As the months turned into years it became harder to keep conversations bright as I watched young men, when I first meet them were bright, full of hope and belief that they would get a visa. The toll on their physical and mental wellbeing was hard to see.

These young men were younger than my own son and it was heartbreaking and frustrating to watch them sink further into depression and self harmed. Some were taken to mental hospital eg Glenside where I would visit. Even there one was escorted by 2 guards as you walked with your friend around the grounds. However after awhile the staff there was able to get the number of guards reduced. One young man in particular after 5 attempts on his life in Baxter, he was always returned after each attempt to the same environment which caused him to want to end his life. Has recently become an Australian Citizen. I was able to share this experience with him in Melbourne recently. He still suffers from depression and was homeless for awhile. He was worked but not able to hold down a full time job but volunteers. He has a good friend in Melbourne who is trying to obtain a flat/place for him. There had been good outcomes for many who have got visas now but so many are slipping through cracks as they are unable to cope. A young Afghani who saw his brothers killed by Taliban and who's father helped him to escape has recently lost his mother. The whereabouts of his father and an older brother are unknown. He obtained work 2 weeks after leaving Baxter saved and brought a car 18 months later moved up north saved and went to meet younger family members who were safe now in Pakistan after 7 years. He got married and is now saving up to bring his young bride and the remaining family to Australia. He is a hard worker and rings me every few days and is close to my own children.

I was able to assist supporters to apply to the Guardianship Board to protect those who were suffering mental illness as a result of their detention. We were successful in most cases of getting them protect through the Office of the Public Advocate. The staff there was very helpful and gave the detainee another avenue to assist them. It was difficult to explain that while the Guardianship Board was as government agency it was not run by the Commonwealth Government in power at the time. Detainees mistrusted governments.

I belief a lot of the hardship was caused not only by the situation the detainee found themselves in but the attitude of the Guards who's behaviour towards these in their care left a lot to be desired. Abusive language was common as I waited for a friend to come to the phone I overheard a lot. In fact at one time I did ask the person if they realise that I could hear every word. Not only was verbal abuse common but also physical.

Property was lost and never accounted for when detainee and visitors alike asked where it was. Many of the detainees kept new clothes given to them by friends for special occasions was not there when they were released. This occurred within the last few months when an Indian man was released from Villawood.

During 2006/7 there was an intake of young Iraqis who had come from Greece where they had lived and worked. These were all Catholic and at risk. The were held in Baxter and I was lucky enough to visit them on Christmas Eve 2006 where we prayed and enjoyed each others company. As I was leaving I handed each a Christmas card A

8/8/08

female guard came from the observation area and asked me what I had given them and that I would be on report. I then had to ask them to be given back to me and that I would put them through property in so and so's name for them. This was just one example of the control over a small thing. It was not a good way for us to end our last visit.

There are many cases which I am sure you are aware of, eg young people locked up as adults under 18 years of age, children and wives separated from fathers and husbands etc. Lack of privacy was a big issue loss of identity, lack of respect and help when ill.

The guards were not trained to handle the situation they were placed in. Friends not able to hand a gift to the person. I had Strepsels Lozenges taken from me, reason was they contained alcohol. I had brought them for a detainee who had a bad throat and was not given anything for it.

There had been many good stories from those who are now permanent residents of Australia. Happy relationships which led to marriage and parenthood. I receive many phone calls for birthdays, and Christmas. The ones which give me such happiness are those I receive on Mother's day. I am proud to call sons and daughters..

This Easter I returned to Woomera for a reunion and as accommodation was in short supply I found myself billeted at the Woomera Detention Centre now renamed Rapier. I can not put in words my feelings as I walked around that desolate place and remembered all who had existed there and what it must have felt like for them.

As I walked and prayed for these brave refugees I was amazed to see the beautiful paintings at the end of the buildings. In this desert they brought beauty with scenes from home and distant lands.

My wish for this never to happen again, Yes we do need to protect ourselves but not in such a way that damages people for life. Locking refugees up for years causing mental illness is not in best interest of anyone.

I was please to hear that the current government is looking at this issue so all the years of Letter writing, phone calls to politician's lawyers Red Cross etc have not been in vain My reason for visiting 7 years ago was not to preach religion but to offer the hand of friendship to those who needed it. I believe I have gained more than I gave them. The tears and nightmares were worth it.

I am still in contact with those who were removed from Baxter last year and who are now in Villawood. I do travel finances permitting to the Eastern states to visit friends, meet their families. and hold new babies.

I hope this brief summary of what my life has been like in the past 8 years and the impact of our Immigration Act has had on those who I call friends. My children have been very supportive without their help I couldn't have not have done it. Like many others it has cost me the loss of family members, siblings, who do not want to know me because of my involvement with terrorists. My catholic faith has always been strong and help me.

There are many stories I could talk about but I think this is enough. One day I will write a book for my grandchildren who love meeting these people who don't speak English as my Dylan would say. He was with me as I meet two Iraqis off the State liner bus from Port Augusta. One of the men picked him up and said hello Dylan. "How do you know my name said 4 year old Dylan?" Because we know your grandmother and love her.

These two had received permanent visas after 5 years in detention.

Cecilia Quinn

8/8/08