

NOT THE HILTON: IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTRES: INSPECTION REPORT

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Chair: Joint Standing Committee on Migration

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The Joint Standing Committee on Migration has responsibility to parliament to monitor the Immigration and Multicultural Affairs portfolio. This responsibility extends to inspecting and monitoring detention centres established under the Migration Act. During its latest inquiry, the committee inspected one of the 'people smuggling' boats. It also witnessed a boat with suspected unlawful non-citizens on board being towed to a detention site by the Royal Australian Navy and the subsequent processing of the passengers. Committee members were therefore able to see for themselves the conditions under which the 'boat people' had arrived and to appreciate the labour intensive nature of the initial arrival processing. The committee did not formally meet with or talk to people detained at centres under the Migration Act.

It is important to note that this report focuses on the infrastructure and services at each of the detention establishments. The committee's report covers management, staffing and security at the centres. It also examines the physical amenities and interpreting, health, education, recreation and cultural services available to the detainees. The committee's inspections took place from November 1999 to May 2000. During this time, increasing numbers of people were arriving illegally on Australian territory by boat. In the year just past, a record total of 4,174 people had arrived this way, compared with 3,071 in the previous five years.

The committee visited the new centres established at Curtin and Woomera to accommodate the increased number of arrivals. In addition, it inspected the facility on Christmas Island used to accommodate illegal arrivals temporarily prior to their transfer to the mainland centres. On the mainland, the committee also inspected Maribyrnong, Perth, Port Hedland and Villawood. These are permanent, long-established and relatively large premises which the committee had previously visited and reported on in 1998. In Darwin and Broome the committee inspected the arrangements for the accommodation of small numbers of illegal fishers held temporarily under the Migration Act. The diversity of the detention centres meant that the committee's recommendations are equally diverse. At both Woomera and Curtin the committee considered that there had been a creditable response to the demands of establishing new centres in isolated areas. At the time of their visit, the committee considered that the medical facilities should be expanded at both sites.

Christmas Island does not receive many illegal entrants. However, prior to their transfer to the mainland, their presence can have a considerable impact on the limited resources of the small local community. The committee has recommended that stocks of equipment be established to cushion the demands made on the island's resources. The committee recommended that the perimeter security at Maribyrnong be upgraded so that the recreational areas could be reopened, thus easing pressure on the other communal areas. Perth detention centre is small, and it was considered to be overcrowded. The committee therefore recommended that it be used only for short-term detention and that there should be more toilet and washing facilities. The influx of boat people had brought Port Hedland close to capacity, but the committee did not consider that it was overcrowded. The committee recommended that the centre be better screened to minimise photographic intrusion on the detainees' privacy. Upgrading of Villawood had been announced when the committee visited in 1998. The committee noted that this had not yet occurred. In view of the volatility of the numbers of illegal arrivals, the committee recommended that the redevelopment of Villawood detention centre proceed. In Darwin and Broome, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority uses the provisions of the migration legislation to detain fishers who have infringed Australia's borders. The range and nature of the facilities provided are therefore different from those of other centres which the committee inspected. The committee was concerned with the standard of the facilities and the poor security of the Broome Centre.

At this point I would like to extend my thanks to the committee secretariat: Ms Gould, Mr Dyer and Ms Herd. I thank them very much for the help that they gave me during the committee hearings. I also thank the other members of the committee; I note that the member for Fowler is about to follow me, and I thank her and the other members for the support they gave me on the committee. I intend to continue my remarks following the contributions of other speakers.

(source: Hansard 4 September 2000)