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MR CHRIS EVANS
 HON MINISTER OF IMMIGRATION
 PARLIAMENT HOUSE
 CANBERRA ACT.

18. 07. 08

Dear Mr. Evans,

Thank you for establishing an Inquiry into
 Immigration Detention.

Attached are some comments. On re-reading
 my submission I note that it seems to be
 mainly a number of statements. I am able
 to give a more detailed basis for the statements
 if it would be helpful for the Inquiry.

I take this opportunity to express my
 appreciation of the many steps already taken
 by you and your government to achieve &
 create a more just Immigration Policy.

Sincerely

A Higgins

SR ANNE HIGGINS, Advice, AM.

Re the Inquiry into Immigration Detention.

The comments that follow come from my experience of Immigration Detention at Woomera since the beginning of 2000 and at Baxter from the time of its opening till it closed in July last year, that is 2007. I was involved in chaplaincy and pastoral care in both Centres and continue to be in contact with a number of refugees who passed through the system. Because some of those detained at Baxter were transferred to Villawood, I have also had limited contact with the centre there.

I recognize the need to process people who arrive unannounced in our country, checking both security and health issues. To do this I agree that people need to be held for a short period of time; where and how they are held needs to be improved. I see no need to impose prison-like conditions on persons seeking asylum. That freedom of movement might need to be restricted for a short period would not, it seems to me, pose a problem, if the situation was more of a hostel type arrangement, even a housing project similar to those eventually establish at Woomera and Port Augusta or a situation similar to the De La Salle family refuge outside Richmond, N S W.

Such a situation needs

- trained staff, not prison guards-at least for normal interaction. I realize there may need to be guards on the periphery of the property**
- no crowding of more than one family into a house;**
- medical and counseling staff available in recognition that persons arriving could already be traumatized from their experiences in country of origin or en route;**
- ready access to translators**
- courtesy and respect from all in authority at every level**
- not a remote location.**
- a period of time no longer than 4 weeks.**

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It is now recognized, I understand, that the type of punitive detention imposed on persons seeking asylum, led to mental illness, and sometimes significant physical illnesses. However, punitive detention did continue, and still continues, despite this recognition. In doing this we degrade ourselves as a people and injure our international reputation.

In many cases we took traumatized people and further traumatized them. In some cases it is doubtful that there will ever be a recovery. Then while in detention, to quieten disturbed people, they were heavily medicated and in so doing we set up drug dependency.

Torture was used. e.g. guards under the pretext of checking on persons would go into and out of "a cell" every hour of the night loudly banging the door and so ensuring the person could not sleep. I am aware that a 12 yr old child was held in a white washed cell devoid of sensory stimulation for attempting suicide. The father was also placed in the cell. Persons were locked in high security cell situations for "the crime" of answering back a guard no matter how rudely that person may have spoken. Some were bashed- I have seen the bruises. The detainees were rendered powerless.

I could give pages of examples of mistreatment and am willing to provide further information if contacted.

Asylum seekers are not a threat nor are they criminals. Some violence and destruction of property resulted from the system not the nature of the persons involved. It wouldn't have happened were it not for the treatment and the hopelessness of the situation in which the asylum seekers were placed.

Giving ill trained, uneducated and sometimes brutal persons control over the lives of others has throughout history always led to abuse, and this certainly was too often the case in our detention centres. Persons in charge could also be corrupted by the situation: the original manager of Baxter would appear to be a case in point.

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I hasten to add that not all officers were inhumane. Within the limits of the system some were very considerate and remain to this day on a friendly footing with those detained. Most just did their job.

The majority of the Dimia/Dima/Diac personnel on the ground were competent, responsible people. At least two of the managers were approachable humane people who reflect credit on the Department. Several of their assistants were persons of similar character. The difficult situation brought out the best as well as the worst in people

My point is that in any detention situation the persons in charge need to be carefully chosen and adequately trained and that giving total control over others can too often lead to abuse.

It is not only the detainees punished for no crime who too often suffered mental illness. I am aware that many who worked in the Centres have also had psychological problems as a result of their experience.

Any system needs to be transparent. The anxiety to hide what was happening not only from the public, and originally the churches, but even politicians is a clear indication something was wrong, and known to be wrong.

The Detention system that has been operated, and is still in place, is flawed. The former bishop of our Diocese has described it as toxic.

The system is wasteful of human beings.

It tarnishes our national dignity.

Moreover it is wasteful of monetary resources.

As it has operated, it is not necessary.

Any system needs to be transparent.

Sr Anne Higgins fdnsc.