

Submission No.....	50
Date Received.....	10/07/08

To the Joint Standing Committee on Migration,
 Firstly, I wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity to express the shame I feel at the treatment of the refugees. I am ashamed to be Australian and hope this inquiry leads to a huge change in the direction of the treatment for refugees and asylum seekers.

RECEIVED
 21 JUL 2008
 BY: MLC

After a meeting to hear about the book "From Nothing to Zero," I put my name down to write to two refugees. Soon two names arrived by email. Immediately I wrote to these two detainees in Baxter. Their replies tore at my heart. Muhammad, a Pashtun, is a father of four with a wife, father and surviving brothers in Afghanistan. Ali is Hazara and much younger. He was too young to shave. They had both been locked up in Woomera previously.

I sent pictures of my family, parcels and telephoned regularly. Always a reply came soon.

It was obvious that I had to travel from Melbourne to Baxter by train and bus to visit Baxter, the first of seven trips. It was one of the most traumatic experiences of my life and took many days for me to calm down. The effect on me of being locked up behind those electrified fences and razor wire, being searched on arrival and departure after passing through those horrible gates and overlooked continuously by the privately employed guards who, almost without exception, were not there to help and support but to impress on us all that these asylum seekers, who were ultimately proven to be genuine refugees, were fearful prisoners not to be trusted and worse than convicted murderers locked up in prisons. Even Victoria had closed the similar Jika Jika "facility". Most of those guards did believe the misrepresentations of the government, that these were "illegals" when it is not illegal to seek asylum.

Since their release, almost three years ago, and after approximately 5 years in detention, my experiences with these refugees continues to amaze me that they could survive at all, even with deep psychological scars. Muhammad has not seen his wife and children for more than eight years. They are both wonderful people - deeply humane and caring, even for me with my poor health. They have profound integrity, loyalty and honesty. They are faithful and responsible. Both are intelligent and apply themselves well, working very hard at their jobs and making a life for themselves now as they wait, and

wait for their Permanent Visas.

Muhammad is a skilled mechanic leaving a business with nine employees in Afghanistan to save his own life after his brother was killed by the Taliban and is working as a mechanic here in Melbourne. They have both worked at two jobs for long hours to save money. Through these two friends we have met many other refugees and always find the same delightful attributes.

The expense of keeping these worthwhile human beings locked up is immense. A much greater humane and economical solution would be community support for these people while health and security checks are completed. I would have been delighted to welcome these refugees into my home, as, indeed I did on their release. I do not think this even needs to be "community detention" but, rather community support until such time (short) as it is deemed that these people pose no threat to the health, safety and security of our society.

But, whatever solution is adopted, it cannot be so demeaning and disgraceful as the high-security "facility".

That they could spend so many years in detention and still have to wait months for police and health checks after being told they would be released and then having to wait three more years on TPVs is too cruel and so expensive on me as a taxpayer.

The cruel, inhuman treatment of these fine people extended from the terrible food which caused many complaints - usually being chicken and the lowest quality rice available - to having to crouch under the low showers in a cramped shower recess to not being told what was happening outside so they lived on a knife-edge of fear and frustration. They were even told blatant lies. For example, a friend of mine from Victoria was visiting another friend in Baxter and she agreed to take a form from Ali's solicitor for him to sign. He knew she was coming and was so pleased to be able to sign this important document giving me permission to speak to his solicitor. But the guards saw that letter. My friend sat there for two hours and was told Ali did not want to see her. Meanwhile, Ali was still waiting and was told that my friend had not arrived! Imagine my fury and frustration. That meant my friend had to find her way to Baxter from outside Port Augusta the next visiting time at great expense and effort to herself and, this time, hide the letter. Ali, of course was waiting.

These refugees are already making a contribution to Australian life and should not have been subjected to this shocking treatment. Ali was told he would be released, but it took the Ombudman's report many months later before he was eventually released. The Ombudsman's report stated he should have psychological support. He has received no support, not even a medical report on his release!

Muhammad, meanwhile really needs support and I worry about how his family is going to cope when he is eventually able to

meet with them. These families need huge support to reunite. The cultural and emotional difficulties will be immense. The years of separation is too long and increases all the expected problems of adapting to family life here in Australia.

But for all the horrors they have faced in Australia, our friends are not as badly off as those who are on Bridging Visa E. How can any society throw people out of the horrifying experience that is detention in a high-security setting on to the streets with no way to earn a living, no access to medical care and, for years, waiting for any sort of visa.

These wonderful people were hidden away in the deserts a distance from Woomera and Port Augusta, away from the Australian people who, I believe, would never have tolerated treatment of fellow human beings for long once they got to know them. Now that our friends are out Australians love them and offers them support in many different ways. It was so hard, so expensive and so emotionally draining for me to visit these remarkable, brave people. It always cost me about one thousand dollars for fares, hotel accomodation and taxis out from the Port Augusta town to Baxter. The cost for the legal advisors was even greater.

The "facility" at Christmas Island must NEVER be used for imprisoning asylum seekers. How would these human beings ever have visitors, legal support or hope of release?

Thank you again for the opportunity to tell you of my experiences, even if still painful to express.

Yours faithfully,
Willis Ripper