



PART 1: “Boat people”

*The burden of the long journey
The hardness of life in the new land
Were not for wealth luxury or gold
But for survival if the truth be told¹*

1 Detainee poem MUD1, Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre.



Port Hedland

Immigration Reception and Processing Centre

- 3.1 When the Committee visited Pt Hedland Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC) in May 1998 the stated capacity of its 11 accommodation blocks was 700. Following the refurbishment DIMA currently assesses that the centre can house more than 800 detainees.²
- 3.2 The numbers and family composition of the detainee population vary constantly with arrivals and departures. At 30 June 1998 there were 33 detainees, but by 30 June 1999 the number was 635.³
- 3.3 At the time of the Committee's visit on 10 November 1999, the centre held 768 detainees.⁴ The Committee considered that the centre appeared close to capacity. The DIMA Business Manager indicated that this was a comfortable number and that the centre could accommodate another 200 people, depending on the family composition and ethnic mix of any additional intake.
- 3.4 The main nationalities at the time of the Committee's visit were Iraqi (36%); Afghan (35%); Turkish (8%) and Chinese (7%).

2 DIMA, *Protecting the Borders: Immigration Compliance*.

3 DIMA Fact Sheet 82: *Immigration Detention; Annual Report 1997/98*.

4 Comprising 683 men (mainly 20-30 years), 43 women, 42 children.

Management and Staffing

- 3.5 ACM has 28 staff on duty at any one time during the day. They are drawn from a pool of some 150 permanent and temporary employees who are resident in Pt Hedland, and staff are also flown in.
- 3.6 Staff members, while on duty, maintain regular contact with the group of individual detainees assigned to them. The staff were not accompanied by interpreters, and therefore a possible language barrier remained. However, the Committee noted that the arrangement provided the detainees with a familiar staff figure who could facilitate access to management.

Detention

- 3.7 The centre undertakes reception and processing as well as detention. New arrivals are initially held in a separate compound from the main group of detainees. This “separation detention” is designed to prevent the new detainees from being coached by those with recent experience of the DIMA processes.
- 3.8 Detainees undergo an initial entry interview by DIMA officers, during which the officer attempts to determine the reasons for the person’s presence in Australia. This interview is summarised and an assessment made of whether the person has made claims which, prima facie, may engage Australia’s protection obligations.
- 3.9 In the case of a detainee who has provided prima facie evidence of having a claim to Australian protection, a further interview is conducted. This involves the detainee, a DIMA officer, an interpreter and a legal representative to assist with filling in forms.⁵
- 3.10 At Pt Hedland, the Committee was informed, individuals who do not raise prima facie claims for Australia’s protection were normally returned to their country of origin within a week. Most detainees (83%) at Pt

5 If a detainee shows at their entry interview that they have, prima facie, a claim on Australian protection, under the Immigration Application Assistance Scheme, the detainee is entitled to be provided with application assistance. This is funded by the Commonwealth and provided by private contractors. Four contractors provide services in Pt Hedland. DIMA (ie Commonwealth) funded application assistance is also available to detainees filling out applications for appeals to the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT). Further appeals beyond the RRT do not attract Commonwealth funded assistance.

Hedland had been there less than six months at the time of the Committee's visit.⁶

Amenities

- 3.11 Four detainees are generally allocated to one room with four single bunk beds. Families, ie couples and parents with children, are accommodated in family areas.

Interpreting Services

- 3.12 There is some interpreting available at the centre, with the telephone interpreter service used as needed.

Health

- 3.13 A medical centre is open from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm daily, a daily clinic is held by a medical practitioner, and a nurse is available on call. A full-time counsellor is also employed and is available eight hours per day, five days a week. Mothers are taught about nutrition and dietary needs for their children by health staff.

Education

- 3.14 There are two teachers employed at the centre. A basic English comprehension program is available to the detainees, usually two classes daily, and DIMA advises that most detainees attend. The adult education classes also include nutritional issues and social awareness. Detainees who speak English may also use the education facilities to teach other detainees.
- 3.15 A children's education program is conducted on-site, with a weekly supervised excursion to the local school for sporting activity.

⁶ A further 4% had been in detention for between 6 and 12 months. An overview of duration of detention, nationality etc in each centre is at Appendix C.

Cultural

- 3.16 It is in the interests of the smooth operation of the IRPC to minimise potential friction between ethnic groups. Consequently, efforts have been made at the centre to accommodate specific needs of ethnic groups. The Committee noted that because of the large numbers of Muslims the Shiite *Al-Islam Mosque* and the *Sunni Mosque* have been established at the centre in addition to arrangements for other religions.
- 3.17 The centre's normal routines are varied to permit religious observance, eg the timing of meals is altered to allow for fasting periods during Ramadan, and special menus are provided for Chinese and Sri Lankan New Year. Other religious festivals are also catered for.
- 3.18 Religious workers from local Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches also visit the centre.

Recreation

- 3.19 The IRPC is not a gaol, but the occupants are detainees who do not enjoy their liberty. It is in the interests of the management to ensure that the detainees' concerns with their situation do not lead to disruptive behaviour. Provision of recreation opportunities is one means of decreasing this risk.
- 3.20 There were large outdoor areas with shading which the detainees could use, as well as areas for soccer, volleyball and basketball.
- 3.21 The Committee noted that each accommodation block visited had a recreation room with a small refrigerator, a hot water jug, a sink, television, and toys. The rooms were clean, and the furniture old and extremely basic.
- 3.22 The education area had a sewing machine, computers, typewriters, and television.
- 3.23 As the detainees can be kept in the IDC for long periods, occasionally small groups are permitted visits to the town swimming pool. In the past some ACM personnel had arrange basketball and also ad-hoc fishing in the near vicinity, but these activities had been discontinued before the recent sharp increase in numbers in the centre.

Security

- 3.24 The isolation of Pt Hedland contributes to the overall security of the IRPC. The centre itself is surrounded by a high fence. Inside, the area between the buildings is subdivided by similar high wire mesh fences. Gates between these compounds were open when the Committee visited, allowing the detainees to mix, but could be closed to contain specific areas if necessary.
- 3.25 The Committee observed that detainees in the outdoor recreation area were photographed by media personnel from outside the centre. The Committee was concerned that this invasion of privacy could enable identification of individuals. This could be argued as posing a risk for detainees who are subsequently returned home, and that potential risk being used as a new argument for warranting Australian protection.

Conclusion

- 3.26 The location of the facility in Pt Hedland provides a number of advantages for the detainees, allowing them access to off-site facilities and amenities.
- 3.27 Although the centre was close to capacity, the Committee did not consider it overcrowded.
- 3.28 The Committee considered that it was undesirable for detainees to have their privacy compromised through media coverage.

Recommendation 1

- 3.29 **The Committee recommends that the centre be screened to minimise photographic intrusion.**

