

RAAF Base Curtin (Derby)

Temporary Immigration Reception and Processing Centre

- 4.1 The temporary centre at the Curtin RAAF Base was reopened in September 1999 and has a capacity of approximately 1,000.¹ The population of the site at the beginning of November 1999 was 301. When the Committee visited on 11 November it had risen to 655, including 43 women (two pregnant). The 15-20 families had been kept intact. A further 182 detainees were due to arrive that afternoon and by the following day numbers were expected to rise to about 980. The intention is to keep the detainees in their original boat groups as far as possible, but there were no internal barriers to movement when the Committee visited.

Management and Staffing

- 4.2 DIMA's role, as in other centres, is overall policy administration. Day-to-day management is by ACM. The on-site manager reported excellent support in the setting up of the centre from DIMA, the RAAF, and ACM.
- 4.3 There were 73 staff when the Committee visited. This was expected to increase to about 100 when the site reached its capacity of approximately 1,000. The staff are trained and accredited as correctional or detention personnel. They work 12-hour shifts, but in the setting-up stage at Curtin they had been working longer hours.

1 It had previously been used to supplement Pt Hedland's capacity from 20 April 1995 – 7 December 1995. DIMA, *Annual Reports*, 1994/95; 1995/96.

- 4.4 Staff were on six-week contracts and the staff changes are on a three-weekly cycle to ensure some measure of continuity.

Detention

- 4.5 The centre had been open for little over a month when the Committee visited. The site was surrounded by a high fence and the administration buildings were within the perimeter but inside their own enclosure.
- 4.6 A number of transportable units had been installed and foundations had been laid to allow for the erection of more such units. This would permit detainees to be moved from the tented accommodation which had been set up initially.
- 4.7 The Committee was impressed by the progress made in the short time since the site was re-commissioned, and in the handling of the unexpected increase in demand.
- 4.8 At the time of the Committee's visit, there had been insufficient processing to establish whether detainees had prima facie claims to protection.

Legislative changes

- 4.9 Some of the detainees arrived in Australia after changes to the immigration regulations took effect on 20 October 1999 or made claims after that date. Prior to 20 October 1999 applicants could expect to receive a Permanent Protection Visa if they were found to qualify for protection by Australia.
- 4.10 However, under the new arrangements, people arriving in Australia unlawfully will, if eligible for protection, receive a *Temporary* Protection Visa valid for three years. They will not be able to sponsor other family members to Australia during that period.
- 4.11 These new conditions had been explained to the detainees shortly before the Committee visited Curtin. This news had created unrest. The detainees were advised that if these arrangements were unacceptable, they could request removal from Australia.

Amenities

- 4.12 When the Committee visited, about 300 of the detainees were accommodated in groups of four to six in tents which are used to accommodate up to nine Australian Defence Force personnel when operating in Northern Australia. The tents had electric lighting but were not air-conditioned. Priority was being given to moving women and children into portable air-conditioned buildings, and all detainees were expected to be rehoused in them within a month of the Committee's visit.
- 4.13 Because the centre was being re-established on a site previously used as a detention facility,² there was ready access to power, water and sewerage systems. In addition to the tent lines and an increasing number of transportable buildings, there was an administrative area, and a small clinic. There was approximately one shower and toilet for every 12-15 people, and the committee observed queues for both the men's and women's showers.
- 4.14 The Committee thought that the mess facilities were good, with five chefs and a number of kitchen hands. Detainees have successfully been encouraged to assist in the mess hall. The centre provides all detainees with three meals a day, two of which are hot meals.
- 4.15 Those detainees with money are able to access it through conversion to Australian dollars by a bank and to use it by arranging to have goods (mainly cigarettes) purchased off-site on their behalf.

Interpreting Services

- 4.16 DIMA indicated that the staff mainly spoke Arabic as a second language, and that the Telephone Interpreters Service was available.

Health

- 4.17 The main health problems seen at the clinic are dehydration and rashes. At the time of the Committee's visit the clinic operated from one air-conditioned demountable building. An additional unit for overnight observation was to be installed. There is medical attention available 24

2 The Centre was operational from 20 April to 7 December 1995 inclusive, housing East Timorese, among others. DIMA, *Annual Report, 1995/96*

hours a day from nurses and a medical practitioner is available 16 hours / day and in emergencies.

- 4.18 The Committee was impressed by the professionalism displayed by the nursing staff.
- 4.19 Assistance with routine testing (such as Mantoux for tuberculosis), was provided by Derby hospital, and relieved the centre's staff of some time-consuming activities. Other medical support is available from the hospital, including a hotline, and also from Kimberley Public Health. A car is always available for medical evacuations to Derby.
- 4.20 The need for hygiene is emphasised to detainees. DIMA advises that a comprehensive health program has been implemented. The centre provides showers, shampoo, washing machines and disposable nappies.
- 4.21 The Committee noted that a team was ready to begin counselling detainees as soon as there was sufficient infrastructure.
- 4.22 The clinic was in cramped accommodation in one demountable building. Owing to the heat it was not possible to run clinics in the tents. The Committee noted that no separate cubicles were available for patients in the clinic. The one patient that the Committee observed was lying on the floor while being treated for dehydration.

Education

- 4.23 By early 2000, DIMA reported, there were regular English literacy and numeracy classes provided for the adult population by a full-time Education Coordinator. Classes for school-age children were held twice a week, and negotiations for some children to attend Derby Public School were being undertaken.

Cultural

- 4.24 Most of the detainees were Muslim. Other religious groups were accommodated separately from the Islamic groups, but there was no separation of Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Meals provided included meat and vegetarian dishes with an emphasis on rice and pasta. DIMA advises that this menu, and the meal time, was varied to facilitate the observance of Ramadan.

Recreation

- 4.25 Although the detainees had plenty of space to move around in and there was shade available, the hot and dry conditions during the day discouraged outdoor activity.
- 4.26 Although the Committee did not observe any organised recreation or educational activities, DIMA advises that by March 2000 there were soccer, basketball, and volleyball competitions for adults and children. At the time of its visit the Committee noted that the energies of staff and management were still fully absorbed in establishing the centre and providing essential services.

Security

- 4.27 The Committee noted that the detainees at Curtin appeared less settled than at most other centres visited. ACM told the Committee that this was probably a consequence of the fact that they had arrived in a centre which was still being created, and which lacked an established population which can ease new arrivals' adaptation to their new circumstances. The abrupt change to the detainees' expectations (resulting from legislative changes which had affected their potential visa status) would also have contributed.
- 4.28 Unlike Pt Hedland, there were no internal divisions within the detainees' accommodation area at Curtin when the Committee inspected the site. This made the centre vulnerable to massing and incitement of detainees in a manner not possible at the permanent centres.
- 4.29 The ACM management expected this possibility to recede as the opening of more air-conditioned quarters gave people an attractive alternative to remaining outdoors and lessened the potential for mass actions.
- 4.30 There was a higher ratio of staff to detainees at Curtin than at Pt Hedland. However, compared to their Pt Hedland counterparts, the staff at Curtin were newer to their jobs and working in a more fluid environment where the routines and precedents which assist in the management of detainees had yet to be established.

Conclusion

- 4.31 The Committee felt that, despite the newness of the site at the time of its visit, the centre was providing the basic amenities and services required.
- 4.32 However, the Committee considered that the climatic conditions at the centre merited the provision of more washing and toilet facilities.
- 4.33 The Committee noted the way in which the practical demands of setting up a site had not been permitted to overshadow the humanitarian aspects. The centre's staff showed concern for the detainees and the preservation of their dignity.
- 4.34 The Committee considered that the short-term staff contracts would diminish the corporate knowledge of the particular dynamics and needs of detainees in a temporary centre. Increased continuity of staff would assist in monitoring and assessing the internal security of the centre.
- 4.35 The Committee considered that, even taking into account the medical support available from outside Curtin, the physical medical arrangements appeared to be inadequate for routine health requirements of 1,000 detainees.
- 4.36 In view of the unrest already experienced at Curtin, the Committee was concerned that there was a potential for problems to arise which would require action by the staff. The Committee observed the lack of internal subdivision of the centre at the time of its visit. It considered that this could hamper the staff in keeping order should a tense situation arise.
- 4.37 As a consequence of these conclusions the Committee makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 2

- 4.38 **The Committee recommends that the ratio of showers and toilets to detainees be increased.**

Recommendation 3

- 4.39 **The Committee recommends that ACM endeavour to maintain staffing continuity by re-engaging staff to maximise the use of their skills and knowledge.**

Recommendation 4

- 4.40 **The Committee recommends that the expansion of on-site medical facilities be given priority.**

Recommendation 5

- 4.41 **The Committee recommended that internal fencing be erected for security reasons.**

