

Woomera

Immigration Reception and Processing Centre

- 5.1 The establishment of an Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC) at Woomera was announced on 9 November 1999. It was opened later that month on Department of Defence property at Woomera West, some 3 km from Woomera town, 500 km from Adelaide.
- 5.2 Woomera represents a considerable investment of government resources at a location well removed from both the boat landing region and from the settled regions of the country.¹
- 5.3 At the time of the Committee's visit the site had a surge capacity of about 1,100 people, depending on the mix of families and individuals. Detainees are accommodated in bunk beds in 1950's vintage barrack blocks with flow-through ventilation, and recently erected transportable units with air conditioning ("dongas").
- 5.4 At the time of the Committee's visit the centre was taking clear steps to finalise its processing arrangements and actively preparing to handle increased numbers. Construction of Stage 2 of the IRPC was about to begin, with completion expected in March 2000.
- 5.5 When the additional demountable buildings have been installed, the centre could accommodate up to 2,000 detainees. The expanded facility is designed to allow separation detention of incoming detainees until their

1 The potential cost of the establishment of Woomera IRPC with a capacity of up to 2,000 was estimated to be \$15 million. DIMA, evidence to Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Legislation, 10/2/00, p. 169.

initial processing is completed. In addition there would be a high security area for high risk detainees, such as those about to be repatriated.

- 5.6 When the Committee visited there were 936 detainees, all of whom had arrived in Australian territory by boat. They comprised 741 males, 60 females and 135 children. There were 40 unaccompanied minors who were believed to have been separated from their families at the time they boarded boats to transit to the Australian coast. They were accommodated separately from the other adults. The majority of the detainees were of Iraqi origin (493), with the next largest group being Afghan (397)².

Management and Staffing

- 5.7 Most of the staff are ACM employees (about 80) with a small number of DIMA personnel and about a dozen administrative staff recruited locally.³ This number was expected to increase as the facility expands.
- 5.8 The centre has established a committee of appointed religious or academic leaders from each ethnic group. It meets weekly with the ACM administration to discuss issues which arise. The aim is to prevent potential confrontations by defusing and resolving issues and by directing the concerns to the appropriate authorities.
- 5.9 As at Curtin IRPC, the ACM staff members are on six week contracts. The Committee noted that some of the staff had previously worked at Curtin IRPC when it was being developed.

Detention

- 5.10 The first 140 detainees arrived by air on 30 November 1999. At the time of the Committee's visit, eight weeks later, there had been 15 intakes of suspected unauthorised non-citizens.
- 5.11 Owing to the pressure of new arrivals on DIMA resources, not all of the Woomera detainees had had an entry interview at the time of the Committee's visit. The pressure on the newly set up centre meant that its

2 The Committee was advised that the other detainees came from Iran (31), Kuwait (8), Palestine (3), and one each from Jordan, Syria, Algeria, and Pakistan.

3 The ACM Centre Manager had under him two operations managers, two operations supervisors, six supervisors, and eight duty officers.

focus had been on receiving, housing and feeding the arrivals, rather than on administrative processing.

- 5.12 The Committee noted that facilities for separation detention did not exist, although they would become available in Phase 2.
- 5.13 In view of the opportunity that the mixing of new arrivals with other detainees offers for the fabrication of misleading stories, the Committee considers that separation detention should have been used from the beginning of the Woomera operation. It is important for the accuracy of the decision-making process at the primary interview that the information provided by the detainees has been subjected to minimal rehearsal and coaching.
- 5.14 It is also important subsequently that those with experience of the DIMA interview process do not provide feedback to those yet to be interviewed.
- 5.15 The lack of any processing at the time of the Committee's visit had created obvious tension among the detainees. The Committee was told that they had arrived with expectations that their cases would be processed within six weeks and were impatient that the centre was not adhering to their expected timetable. They had brought their grievance to the attention of ACM at the residents' meeting on the morning of the Committee's visit. Within fifteen minutes of the Committee's unannounced entry to the accommodation area of the centre, a large group of detainees had assembled waving placards urging that their futures be decided.
- 5.16 However, the Committee also noted that the children with placards appeared cheerful, and that there was evidence of good relations between staff and detainees. On Australia Day a delegation had paraded and presented the management with posters commemorating the occasion. In the administration area there was a poem by one of the detainees.⁴

Amenities

- 5.17 There is a small clinic and a separate administration area. The Committee did not visit any of the brick or transportable accommodation buildings, nor the associated ablution blocks because they were occupied, and there was tension at the centre.
- 5.18 Initially catering was provided by the Woomera hotel. The interior of the kitchen building had to be cleared of sand drifts and new or reconditioned

4 See "Part 1: "Boat people" title page.

equipment installed. By January 2000, A & K Anderson's Catering was operating the air-conditioned mess hall and kitchen. Areas used for assembly for meals had shade cloth awnings.

- 5.19 ACM has arranged for clothes from the Society of St Vincent DePaul to be made available to those without money.
- 5.20 Detainees' emphasis on personal cleanliness has meant greater than expected water usage, which was a potential problem for the centre. Stage 2 will incorporate the installation of new sewerage and water recycling systems.
- 5.21 The installation of these new systems would also benefit the township. The Committee was advised that the opening of the centre had also brought other direct benefits to the township, such as increased employment opportunities and more local expenditure.

Interpreting Services

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

Health

- 5.23 The staple food of the detainees is rice, which is their preference, and their diet is basically vegetarian with some meat.⁵ Fresh produce is delivered to cool rooms once a week. Children are provided with additional food such as fruit and milk or milk substitutes.
- 5.24 There is a women-only weekly health and welfare class which approximately two-thirds of the women attend. It covers subjects such as health, wellbeing, coping strategies and safety in the centre.
- 5.25 When the Committee visited, Woomera IRPC had five nurses. With the expansion of the centre, more nursing staff have been recruited, and by March 2000, DIMA advised, there were 12 ACM nurses assigned to Woomera, including two with midwifery qualifications. A local doctor attends daily from 10.30 am to 2.30 pm on weekdays and the centre has 24-hour emergency access to a doctor. The nurses generally have

5 On the day of the Committee's visit Lunch was vegetarian pasta with two salads, Dinner comprised lamb, vegetables, rice, and Supper (8.30pm) was bread pudding.

experience of practising with limited access to doctors. Often they have experience in outback or prison nursing.

- 5.26 At the time of the Committee's visit about 20 people were receiving counselling, in relation to their present location. Detainees requiring trauma counselling were sent to Melbourne, Adelaide, or Sydney for professional counselling.⁶ By March 2000 there was a full-time counsellor at Woomera, providing counselling on site.
- 5.27 The clinic is housed in an air-conditioned demountable building and a new medical centre is planned as part of Phase 2. DIMA advises that by March 2000 another 24-hour medical centre had been established, within the detainee's compound. The Committee visited the clinic only briefly because a patient had just been admitted with possible dehydration and the presence of Committee members severely reduced the limited space available for treatment.
- 5.28 Dehydration was reported to be the main health problem at the centre. Apart from that, the overall health of most arrivals was reported to be good, with many showing signs of previous immunisation. However, in the absence of any documentation, the detainees are screened for TB, Hepatitis B&C, HIV, and STDs.
- 5.29 The Committee was advised that DIMA intends to review its health screening arrangements because the current protocols, originating from the health profiles of previous "boat people" (Cambodian and Vietnamese), are no longer appropriate.
- 5.30 Most detainees are smokers. Smoking indoors is discouraged but strict enforcement is not pursued because it has the potential to create unnecessary friction between management and detainees. Quit smoking programs are to be introduced.

Education

- 5.31 At the time of the Committee's visit nearly half of the detainees were attending classes. DIMA advises that by March 2000 the majority of the adult population was attending classes. The main subject is English as a Second Language. The 10 instructors are detainees who possess relevant linguistic skills and have appropriate academic backgrounds. Other classes available include relaxation exercise, life skills, health, hygiene,

6 The Committee was advised that, by mid-year, detainees requiring trauma counselling were seen by a qualified counsellor at Woomera.

and maths, and for boys under 18, Tai Chi and calligraphy. A kindergarten commenced operation in February 2000.

Cultural

- 5.32 The two major national groups (Iraqi and Afghan) did not, by choice, associate. Most tended to remain with their own language groups. The Committee was told that there was no religious conflict.
- 5.33 DIMA advises that religious leaders of the various ethnic groups hold daily prayer meetings and conduct daily religious instruction. Religious workers from the Roman Catholic and Uniting Church attend the centre for fortnightly religious services.
- 5.34 Some detainees are involved in the food preparation and this is assisting the caterers in fine-tuning the menus. The main adjustments have been to the cooking and presentation of the rice and increased supplies of tea and sugar.

Recreation

- 5.35 DIMA advises that soccer and volleyball are available. The Committee observed few outdoor recreation facilities apart from a yet to be assembled children's playground and a shaded area when it visited. The climate of Woomera in January is not conducive to outdoor activities. The limited indoor facilities included table tennis.
- 5.36 Detainees are also encouraged to work within the centre. Some 12-15 people work on each shift in the kitchen and others are involved in cleaning and painting. The management praised the application shown by the detainees in this voluntary work.
- 5.37 Detainees earn points for their work which can be converted to funds in a trust account, then spent on items such as clothing, toiletries, and cigarettes purchased on their behalf in Woomera.

Security

- 5.38 Physical security for the site is maintained by a perimeter wire mesh fence topped with razor wire which is floodlit at night. This is complemented

by the siting of the facility on Department of Defence land, which requires a permit to enter. Detainees are briefed on the risks associated with venturing into the dry and hot isolation surrounding the centre.

- 5.39 Each detainee has a photographic identification card which is used in the management of detainees' movements at the facility. It enables, for example, the staff to ascertain that all detainees are attending meals. There is an electronic check to prevent metal objects being taken from the mess hall.
- 5.40 The ACM maintains a staff presence in the detention area as an early warning about potential trouble. This would initially be addressed through negotiation. As the quick reaction to the unannounced visit of Committee indicated, the detainees have an effective internal organisation in the centre. Centre managers have met with local police, ambulance and fire-fighting services to formulate contingency plans.

Conclusion

- 5.41 The Committee considered that the existing medical clinic, like that at Curtin, was too small both for the requirements of the staff and for the handling of the large detainee population.
- 5.42 The Committee noted that the development of Woomera provided another centre for the detention of suspected unlawful non-citizens. This helped to moderate the population pressure on Curtin IRPC. It also probably reduced the strain on management associated with large numbers in a restricted environment.
- 5.43 The Committee also noted that the establishment of the centre provided an economic boost to the host rural area and demonstrated that unexpected demands on Australia's migration process can be met quickly, provided there is useable infrastructure in existence.
- 5.44 Despite its large population, the Woomera IRPC had yet to commence processing and review operations. The Committee was aware that the pressure of new arrivals on existing centres had meant that Woomera had been brought into operation very quickly, and that there would be some delays in the processing. However, the Committee was concerned that there were, at the time of its visit, no separation detention facilities.

Recommendation 6

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