

Inquiry into the administration and operation of the Migration Act 1958

Who we are:

- I am writing for the members of the Kerang Rural Australians for Refugees branch. We have been in existence since early 2002. We meet monthly and have invited speakers to address our meetings. We are involved in
 - Offering friendship to those in need
 - Mutual support for people with caring and humane attitudes towards asylum seekers
 - The seeking of information about the lot of asylum seekers once they are in the hands of DIMIA
 - Moral, physical and monetary support for refugees in and out of detention
 - The education of our community
 - Acting as advocates for those who need support
 - Lobbying parliamentarians to inform them and request a change in the attitudes and practices of DIMIA

What is our experience:

Through telephone calls, internet, personal acquaintance, letter writing, sharing information we have come to know the lives of many refugees. We have met lawyers, church officials, psychologists, activists, MPs, election candidates all with worries about how the law is being administered.

What are our cares:

Pre Detention Centre Incarceration

- Poor, delayed collection of people from dangerous situations
- Inadequate care while awaiting initial assessment
- Untruths told to asylum seekers to gain initial compliance
- Unkind insensitive treatment

Detention Centre Incarceration

- Assumption of guilt instead of innocence by DIMIA
- Continuing vilification of vulnerable people by DIMIA. Eg the frequent use of the term, "illegal" for legal asylum seekers caused untold damage in the attitudes of ordinary Australians
 - The absolutely interminable time taken to process any application. It is soul destroying to refugees who are living on the edge and living in fear of being forcibly returned to their unsafe country.
 - Treating refugees as criminals in detention.
 - Cultural and sexual insensitivity
 - Deliberate isolation of refugees to avoid their having a choice, or sometimes any, professional help and very little charitable contact by caring Australians.
 - Long term incarceration obviously causing mental and physical harm to a powerless group. This in a resilient people who had the courage and initiative to escape death in their own countries.

- Incarceration causing an institutional syndrome robbing the refugees of the ability to make any decision
 - No help for refugees to find out what is happening to their families still at risk in their own countries or in refugee camps elsewhere
 - Inadequate treatment of mental and physical health problems leading to eventual hospitalisation that could have been prevented.
 - Poor quality and training of some guards. Eg in a locked ward of a mental institution, with two guards 24/7, the guards took \$6 away from a suicidal young person. The money was sent so the young person could buy a soft drink from the canteen and have some small self indulgent pleasure. The money was taken because “it might be used to escape in a taxi”
 - Lack of proper useful education and employment.
 - Exploitation of labour. Refugees were “allowed” to work a bit for a pitiful allowance that they could spend only as the management permitted. CD players were allowed but not a course in self lead learning of English.
 - The use of interpreters who were poor interpreters or of a culturally antagonistic group to the refugee. Eg pashtu interpreters employed for Hazara refugees. Happened more than once!
 - Drugged, forcible repatriation of refugees who still feared for their lives and whose case had been botched at various levels.
 - Life threatening and changing decisions are made for refugees that are arbitrary, unpredictable and open to personal interpretation with little effective recourse by the refugee. No one knows how to present a case for the best result. With the same sort of basic information, the results can be entirely different for two refugees. This causes huge depression out and in detention

Out of Detention

- Refugees could be just taken to the nearest town after many years behind razor wire and just dumped in the centre, sometimes in the middle of the night, with little or no knowledge or ability to handle that situation
 - Little care of the after effects of detention on a person
 - Temporary protection visas are no protection for the agonies of the mind. One’s country could be declared safe and one forcibly repatriated to a place where the people in the village were still the same ones that had tried to kill you before.
 - Bridging visa (E)...no work rights, no Medicare rights, no public housing help, no rights to education in English or anything else. What can they do? Of what is the government thinking? It is to the refugees’ great credit that they remain honest. Unnecessary reliance on charity demeans all folk and deprives them of the healing value a job that is useful to their lives. Eg a young person used to hard work has been kicking his heels for some time, dying of boredom and having to lie to his poor mother about why he isn’t able to send home money to buy medicine for her in her sickness. Those of us who need to support this person who is quite capable of supporting himself and his family, could be giving the money to other charities who support people in need because they are unable to work. Such a poor business.
 - Professional people forced to take on menial work rather being helped to take up their profession again and thus be of real benefit to Australia
 - Australian Horticulturists who employ refugees are continually intimidated by raids by DIMIA where their own rights are totally trodden on. Houses are sacked for employment documents without any or a most unlikely warrant. Wives are isolated from husbands while this happens. The farmers are too frightened to make official complaint for fear of retribution. It is happening in Australia.

- There are huge mental health problems out in the bush where the refugee workers are, with inadequate systems to cope with it. These are caused not a little by DIMIA's actions

Conclusion:

There are many more problems with the activities of DIMIA, past and present about which I could give many examples. The above have been a few. Apart from how horrible it is for refugees, we have been appalled by the inappropriate waste of tax payer monies spend uselessly and worse, cruelly by DIMIA.

I trust that this inquiry will lead to a much better solution for refugees in Australia

Bronwyn Hunt
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