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To Whom It May Concern:

I am convenor of the Echuca/Moama Rural Australians for Refugees group which has about forty members.

We are country people living in an almost totally Anglo- Saxon town. Our apathy re the difficulties facing genuine

asylum seekers in Australia has been shattered by visits from a number of young men on Bridging Visa E

and meetings with the Iraqi (and other) TPV holders in Shepparton and Cobram.

We have many grave concerns, I will simply list some:

Women and children came to Australia following their husbands who had been issued with TPVs.

On arrival the women and children spent months - even years- in detention, either in Australia or in off shore detention centres.

Question: Why would it take so long to reunite them with their husbands who were decreed to be genuine refugees?

I have visited Maribyrnong detention centres over the last three years. There is no denying that these are prisons.

Visitors are locked in razor wire topped cages on their way into the centre.

And even though there has been some improvement in the treatment of visitors, I can only imagine how asylum seekers are treated if the

demeaning attitude towards visitors is any indication of the staff's attitude to human dignity.

If this is an indication of the system in a suburb of Melbourne where there is some coming and going from the public,

I am extremely fearful of the conditions that prevail in isolated centres.

Question: What has brought us to be so callous in our treatment of men, women and children

fleeing from countries we acknowledge to be in flagrant violation of human rights?

Why do we treat these people so differently from those who fled here after the Hungarian uprising,

Beijing / Tiananmen Square, etc?

We are currently supporting a young Chinese man on a Bridging Visa E who was engaged in Tiananmen and is a member of Falung Gong.

He has been issued a deportation order which will certainly result in him being imprisoned if he returns to China.

He appealed directly to the Minister just before his deportation date. She promised to look at his case. When he next reported to DIMIA

he was told he would have to return to Maribyrnong Detention centre.

Question: This man had been living in the community, his case was before the Minister, what good purpose did such an action achieve?

The whole system of TPVs is an insult to human dignity. If a person is found, after due process, to be a genuine refugee,

why would we want to prolong their sense of dislocation and ask them to wait indefinite amounts of time before they can get

some semblance of normality into their lives.

There seems to be a particularly vindictive streak to our Immigration policies, which punish those who simply flee for their lives

and, often without much planning, land on our shores.

How can we expect Pakistan to support millions of refugees who flood over their borders ( no money for detention centres there)

when we are too selfish to offer a home to those who risk their lives to come here? By all means check them out and

eliminate those who are not genuine refugees, but can we please desist from punishing further those who most need our help.

And a final question: Why are the hundreds of American and British Visa overstayers not in detention centres?

Is our White Australia Policy still insidiously in place?

Margaret Merrigan

Convenor Echuca/Moama Rural Australians for Refugees.