

Report released on immigration detention centres

Australia's immigration detention centres remain in the public spotlight with the recent tabling of a parliamentary report that has recommended some alternative detention arrangements for asylum seekers.

Concerned about the effect of prolonged detention on people, Parliament's Joint Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee supports the trial of alternative detention arrangements announced for the Woomera detention centre by the Minister for Immigration in late May. The Committee believes this trial, if successful, should be extended to other immigration detention centres.

The Committee has also proposed:

- reducing the time detainees can spend in centres to 14 weeks;
- examining the feasibility of a sponsorship scheme for detainees who have not been processed within 14 weeks but have received a security clearance;
- allocating additional resources to speed the refugee review process;
- providing regular access by detainees to their case officers for updates on the status of their applications for asylum; and
- nominating an appropriate, independent person for each centre to whom complaints about harsh or unfair treatment by detention centre staff can be referred.

The report follows visits to the detention centres earlier in the year by the Human Rights Sub-Committee, one of five sub-committees through which the Committee operates. The visits were in response to concerns expressed by Committee members and various community organisations dating back to March 2000. Since late 1999, there has been a rapid increase in the number of people detained in the centres at Curtin, Port Hedland and Perth (WA), Woomera (SA), Villawood (NSW) and Maribyrnong (Vic).

The report reflects the Committee response to the visit and is not the outcome of a Committee inquiry. Community submissions were not sought and there were no public hearings conducted, so the findings of the Committee are untested.



The immigration detention centre at Woomera in South Australia. Photo: Chris Crerar, Newspix

The Human Rights Sub-Committee met with immigration officials and staff of Australasian Correctional Management, which is contracted to run the centres. Meetings were also held with detainees at each centre, with no immigration or detention centre staff present. Separate meetings were held with women and children detainees.

Committee members were given assurances by immigration and detention centre officials about the standard of facilities, staffing and treatment at the centres. But after discussions with the detainees, the Committee came to the view that medical treatment may not always be satisfactory, educational facilities are limited, and the range of activities provided in the centres is inadequate for the number of detainees.

Of particular concern to the Committee was the impact of detention on families, women and children, and on those detainees who are not coping psychologically with detention. To address its concerns, the Committee has recommended:

- designating blocks within detention centres for the use of families;

- greater access to detention centres by appropriate community organisations, including religious and welfare groups, after detainees have met initial processing requirements; and
- strengthening the role of counsellors and welfare officers at the centres, to ensure awareness of the role of, and assistance provided by, these staff.

The Committee believes the recommendations in its report will improve conditions for detainees, particularly in the short term. The proposals also aim to improve the administration of the centres, address community concerns and ensure that Australia's international reputation does not suffer.

For a copy of the report and more information

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