

Churches call for Major reforms in Australia's Treatment of Asylum Seekers



Tarima is a 28-year-old asylum seeker who arrived in Melbourne from the Horn of Africa. She is disabled, uses a walking frame, and is 8 months pregnant. She arrived here with her sister who is also disabled and uses a wheelchair.

As asylum seekers living lawfully in the community, neither has work rights nor is entitled to any welfare benefit. Not entitled to Medicare, Tarima has not seen a doctor during her pregnancy.

The sisters are homeless and without any income or benefit. They have been staying at a crisis refuge that is inappropriate for the disabled. They can no longer stay there and have nowhere else to go. There is no government funding for this group of asylum seekers and struggling agencies are unable to assist. No one knows what will happen to Tarima and her sister when the baby is born or how she will look after the baby.

This is just one of the cases highlighted in a recent public forum on Australia's treatment

Inhumanity of Australia's treatment of asylum seekers highlighted by official reports.

In June an all party Federal Parliament Human Rights Committee found conditions in some detention centres are appalling, with standards often below those experienced in Australian jails. After examining much evidence and personally visiting the detention centres and meeting detainees, the committee made several recommendations including the following:

- A 14-week limit on detentions provided that asylum seekers meet security clearances.
- Centres to have facilities to keep families together.
- That independent observers be appointed to each centre to hear complaints from detainees.

(AGE 19/6/01)


This Report reinforced many of the findings of an earlier report by the Commonwealth Ombudsman. The Ombudsman noted that detained asylum seekers have been subject to inappropriate use of force and have had their rooms trashed by guards for no apparent reason. The Ombudsman went on to say that detainees in Australia have fewer rights than jail inmates. (AGE 7/3/01).

of asylum seekers that has urged the government to address what was described as "Australia's appalling treatment of asylum seekers". The Forum aimed to address the imbalance of a system which spends large amounts of money on keeping asylum seekers in detention, and almost nothing on asylum seekers living in the community. According to Panelist Alan Matheson, "almost 85% of current Dept. of Immigration funding is allocated to detention and compliance practices", a figure that outraged all present.

The Forum, run in Melbourne by the National Council of Churches and the Uniting Church's Hotham Mission, attracted over 100 participants, representing over 50 church and community groups.

The Forum saw the launch of ABC Radio Asia specialist Peter Mare's book,

"Borderline, Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers", and developed recommendations, to be

forwarded to government, media and the wider community. 

Action:

Please lend your voice to the needs of asylum seekers.

Write to:

You local federal MP

And to the Hon. Philip Ruddock,
Minister for Immigration.

Minister Ruddock's fax number is 02 6273 4144.

Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT 2600.

- Express your concern for the just treatment of asylum seekers.
- Call for resources to be made available to asylum seekers such as Tarima once released.
- Express your concern that asylum seekers should not be detained indefinitely.
- Express your support for the Human Rights Committee Recommendation for independent complaints observers to be appointed for each centre.

The panelists at the Forum were:

Peter Mares, Presenter, ABC Radio National's 'Asia-Pacific'

Reverend David Pargeter, Director for Justice and World Mission, Uniting Church Victorian Synod and Chairperson of Justice for Asylum Seekers Coalition

Martin Clutterbuck, Director of the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre

Sandra De Silva, Refugee Settlement Unit, Springvale Citizens Advice Bureau

Alan Matheson, International Officer, ACTU

Recommendations include the following:

(the full set of recommendations can be found with this article on the TEAR web site.)

- Detention should be limited to initial health, security and identity checks for unauthorised arrivals for a maximum of two months.
- All children and families should be released from detention as quickly as possible. Unaccompanied minors should be released into the care of child protection agencies.
- It is urgent that the basic social and psychological needs of asylum seekers are addressed as these will have impact on the long-term social harmony in this country.
- To call on the Australian Government to honour the current quotas without linking onshore with offshore quotas, thus removing the potential for division amongst the refugee communities.

For further information on the Forum, please contact Mr. Charlie Ocampo, National Council of Churches in Australia (Victoria) (03-96506811).