

A glimpse inside an Australian refugee detention centre

Jake Skeers, Mike Head
22 August 2001

Over the past decade, successive governments in Australia have sought to whip up public sentiment against the asylum seekers arriving on the country's shores in order to justify the draconian policy of incarcerating all new arrivals indefinitely, until they are either deported or granted refugee status.

Last week, however, for the first time, a major television documentary provided an inside view of life in Australia's razor wire-clad detention centres, and allowed some inmates—including three who have escaped from custody—to explain their plight. To a certain extent at least, the program gave a human face to the people that the government brands as criminals. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Four Corners* program, titled "The Inside Story," elicited a considerable public response, with thousands of viewers contacting the ABC to register their disgust at the treatment of refugees.

The program focused on Sydney's Immigration Detention Centre, where there have been several desperate mass escapes in recent months, where an imprisoned Iraqi doctor has helped compile a study on the severe psychological problems of detainees and where a traumatised young boy now refuses to eat or talk. "The Inside Story" featured video footage recorded secretly inside Villawood, as well as interviews with escapees.

Each refugee made it clear that they genuinely feared death if returned to the countries—Algeria, Iran and Iraq—they had fled, and yet their applications for refugee status had been rejected because authorities simply claimed not to believe their accounts, often due to lack of relevant documents and first-hand evidence of persecution.

Since April, 60 people have escaped from Villawood and nearly all remain free, indicating that they have found shelter and support in the community. Escapees told *Four Corners* they had broken out because of the hopelessness of their situation.

Stefan, 32, a member of Algeria's persecuted Berber minority, fled a civil war in which more than 70,000 people, mostly civilians, have been murdered over the past decade.

"I couldn't understand," he commented. "Because when I came here, I thought there were human rights. I came to protect myself—to look for protection, for my rights. When you are at Villawood you ask yourself 'Why am I here—why?' Maybe it's a crime because I came to this country? Because I applied for a protection visa?"

The secretly-produced video revealed the predicament of an Iranian couple, Mohammad and Zahra Bedraie, who have languished in detention for 11 months with an infant daughter and their six-year-old son, Shayan, who spends much of his time in a foetal position. Every five days he is taken to hospital to be drip-fed.

His father said: "All his mother and I can do is cry and sob, day and night, for our child. Now matter how much we beg, he won't eat anything... They [the authorities] know that Shayan's problem is psychological and mental—yet they want to blame us for everything... Do they think we are animals? We are human beings, we love our children."

A lawyer acting for the family, Jacquie Everitt, said Shayan had seen refugees setting fire to themselves and guards with batons beating inmates during riots at Woomera. After being transferred to Villawood, he had walked into a room where one of the detainees had just cut his wrists, spilling blood across the floor.

The most telling aspect of the program, however, was the response of Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock. In line with the government's policy of demonising asylum seekers and blaming them for the treatment meted out to them, he coldly denounced Shayan Bedraie's parents for seeking refuge in Australia and accused them of trying to gain refugee status by making their son ill. Likewise, he dismissed those who mutilated themselves or slit their wrists in detention. "In many parts of the world, people believe they can get outcomes by behaving that way. In part, it's cultural," he declared.

Questioned about the signs of growing public support for the escaped detainees, Ruddock vented the government's other main policy—that of police repression. He reiterated his readiness to enforce recent changes to the law that provide

for up to 10 years' imprisonment for harbouring escapees.

ABC TV received some 5,000 e-mails after the program, many people rang the Immigration Department the next day and newspapers published numerous letters from people expressing their outrage at the government's stance.

Several letters associated the Howard government's detention policies with Nazi war crimes and declared their willingness to break the law to help escaped asylum seekers. "In Denmark in 1943 my parents and their friends hid Jewish people from the Nazis. I'd be happy to help any refugees from our 'detention' camps stay in Australia," one declared.

Far from pulling back in the face of this condemnation, Ruddock went further the next night on another ABC TV program, *The 7.30 Report*. Referring several times to Shayan Bedraie as "it," he denounced his father for not allowing the young boy to be taken away from the family and placed with foster parents. He also insinuated that the boy's illness could be "predisposed" or caused by the fact that he was no longer living with his natural mother.

Ruddock has refused to allow the family to live in the community while they appeal to the High Court against the rejection of their application for refugee status. He has arranged for Shayan to be placed in foster care, against the advice of doctors that Shayan live in a more normal environment, while refusing to rule out deporting the family, leaving Shayan behind. He has also dismissed the Bedraie family's request to remain in Australia on humanitarian grounds.

Ruddock's callous attitude expresses the inherent logic of a policy based on deterring asylum seekers, regardless of the human cost. Far from softening its approach, the government is intent on making its policy more restrictive, with the bipartisan support of the Labor Party.

On the same day that the *Four Corners* program was broadcast, Ruddock announced measures to further narrow the test of refugee status and to make it easier for officials to reject asylum seekers who lack identification documents. Both measures, endorsed by Labor, fly in the face of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which defines refugee status and bars governments from discriminating against applicants who, out of necessity, flee without valid documents.

Just three days after the *Four Corners* program, while Ruddock was defending himself against criticism, a prominent Labor Party leader sprang to his aid. New South Wales Premier Bob Carr joined him for a media conference where the pair outlined new measures to bar or remove immigrants on grounds of "bad character". Carr expressed his appreciation for Ruddock's stance.

While laying bare some of the barbaric features of the government policy, *Four Corners* did not advance any

alternative, except to present New Zealand's system as a more humane approach. In that country, where few asylum seekers arrive, most are permitted to live in the community while their refugee claims are assessed. Nevertheless, the basic policy of removing unwanted arrivals remains—in fact, the system is designed to streamline the rejection process and then make it easier to convince deportees to leave the country.

The essential perspective of the *Four Corners* program was to argue for the Australian government to project a more humanitarian image, reflecting the concerns of business leaders that the existence of refugee concentration camps is harming tourism and trade, particularly in Asia. The program's introduction stated: "Last September, at the Sydney Olympic Games, Australia was the toast of the world. On centre stage: our multicultural heritage and our belief in a fair go for everyone. But now, less than a year later, Australia is presenting a different face."

No amount of gloss, or even modifications to the mandatory detention regime, however, can alter the fact that the policy will be directed to barring the entry of destitute people. On a world scale, rising numbers of refugees—official estimates currently put the total at 43 million—are seeking ways to flee from oppression, military conflict, communalism and impoverishment. Directly or indirectly, their plight has been caused by the economic and military activities of the Western powers—from the bombing of Iraq and Yugoslavia to the extraction of debt repayments from Africa.

Invariably denied entry to the West, most refugees are trapped in camps in some of the world's poorest countries, such as Pakistan and Sudan. It is hardly surprising that growing numbers are resorting to dangerous journeys to seek a safe haven and a better life, including hazardous boat trips to Indonesia and then Australia. The only genuinely humane policy is to recognise their basic democratic right to travel and live where they choose, with full political and social rights, including decent housing, health care and welfare.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact