

Another inquiry into Australia's refugee detention centres

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Yet another official inquiry—the sixth in 15 months—is to be held into the conditions inside Australia's refugee detention centres. The government's own Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) has announced an inquiry into children being held in detention.

Locked away under Australia's mandatory detention policy are pregnant women, babies and unaccompanied children as young as eight. There are currently 582 child prisoners. They include 53 who are unaccompanied by adults, of whom 40 are in the remote Woomera camp on the edge of the South Australian desert.

The Howard government refuses to release any details on the ages, backgrounds and countries of origin of the children, or the length of time they have been in detention. Some are detained indefinitely, having been denied refugee status but unable to find a country willing to take them.

The HREOC inquiry, headed by Human Rights Commissioner Sev Ozdowski, a former senior public servant, will examine the health, education, culture, security and long-term well being of children in detention, which are meant to be protected by the international Convention on the Rights of the Child. The terms of reference do not include reviewing the policy of mandatory detention itself. Instead, they assume its continuation, subject to "safeguards" for human rights.

The investigation will be a drawn-out affair, lasting a full year, including visits to detention centres and submissions from welfare and humanitarian agencies. HREOC announced the report after receiving eight complaints this year about detained children, up from zero complaints in 2000. The complaints, from detainees and advocates, centred on children being roughly handled by guards and denied schooling.

Just days after the announcement, a police spokesperson revealed two allegations of sexual assault of minors in the Port Hedland camp in Western Australia. Six weeks ago, detention centre staff reported to the police an assault of a 12-year-old boy, but his parents did not press charges. Five weeks ago, a male detainee allegedly assaulted a 12-year-old

boy.

Previous reports produced since September 2000—two from Ombudsmen, two from parliamentary committees and one commissioned by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock—have already provided plentiful evidence of appalling conditions. Asylum seekers can be incarcerated for years, treated like criminals and abused by staff, resulting in systematic health problems.

In March this year, the Ombudsmen said children and unattached women faced extreme risks of assault in detention and found evidence of racial abuse and "a heavy handed approach" by guards. An all-party parliamentary committee reported that children in detention experienced confusion, lack of activity and general stress, leading to "depression and aggression".

Despite disclosing this state of affairs, each report proposed only limited modifications, but even these recommendations have been rejected or ignored by the Howard government. Ruddock has indicated that the same fate awaits the HREOC report. While stating that the government would cooperate with the inquiry, he declared: "The issues that will be addressed won't be new ones."

Ruddock said "an obvious human response" to children being locked away in desert camps had to be weighed against "the wider responsibility the government has to be able to manage an effective immigration program". In other words, children must be detained, facing mental and physical abuse, to deter further asylum seekers. Prime Minister John Howard backed Ruddock, declaring: "I want to make it plain that we're not going to alter our policy in relation to mandatory detention."

In line with the government's policy of demonising asylum seekers, Ruddock accused parents from countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq of sending their children to Australia as a device to obtain refugee status for themselves. The truth is that parents facing persecution are prepared to go to great lengths, and risk never seeing their children again, to try to ensure freedom and safety for them.

Margaret Piper of the Refugee Council told the *Australian*

that most unaccompanied children in detention centres are Hazara boys aged 15 to 17, who fled Afghanistan in order to avoid being kidnapped by the Taliban and forced into performing tasks such as walking through minefields. At a recent conference in Sydney, refugee lawyer Jacqui Everitt said parents often sacrificed their savings and possessions so that their children could escape political persecution or poverty.

Everitt also spoke of the physical and psychological impact of detention on children. She revealed that teenage detainees had been placed in solitary confinement, as had one woman, accompanied by two young children. They were allowed out of isolation cells only twice a day to go to the toilet. In between times, they were given plastic bags to use.

Detention flew in the face of all advice on the long-term development of children, she said, particularly when they had witnessed torture and been separated from their parents. One unaccompanied boy in Woomera had been able to develop ties with a detained family. But the family was later granted refugee status and released, leaving the boy in detention to cope with the psychological damage of being separated from two sets of guardians.

Everitt told ABC Television: “Every mother I speak to [in detention] tells me the same things about her children—they stop eating, they stop speaking, they stop playing, they lose weight, they don’t sleep, they wet their beds. It’s all exactly the same symptoms time and time again.”

The convening of the HREOC inquiry reflects concerns expressed by various media commentators and others in ruling circles, who see the flouting of international Conventions as damaging to Australia’s image abroad. Without challenging mandatory detention, they wish to exempt children in order to limit the criticism and disgust felt by many in Australia and ease the claims of racism from Asian trading partners.

The inquiry was unveiled at a time of continuing unrest in the detention centres. On November 20, about 200 asylum seekers in the main compound and 50 in the high security Oscar compound at the remote Woomera detention centre, staged a protest yelling “visa, visa, visa”. Later that night, plumes of smoke and flames were seen as three buildings were set alight.

Two days earlier, six Iranian refugees escaped from Woomera, walked 5km to a roadhouse at Pimba and waited several hours for police to arrest them. The men had used a hacksaw blade to penetrate two high security fences, taking food and water for the desert trip. The media did not report the breakout until after the fire.

When the escapees appeared before Magistrate Stefan Metanomski in Port Augusta, he rejected a government application to deny them bail so that they could be

imprisoned in jail. He commented that the men had been in detention for a “disturbing” length of time—between 10 and 23 months, with an average of 20 months. “To refuse these people bail would effectively be punishing them for being refugees,” Metanomski said. “In good conscience I cannot and will not do that.”

He released the men on bail to be sent back into mandatory detention. In defiance of the ruling, the Immigration Department sent the prisoners to Adelaide jail for what an official claimed were “operational security” reasons.

A South Australian lawyer, Jeremy Moore, told the *Age* that tensions had been building in Woomera for at least a week before the protest, due to the seemingly random processing of refugee claims. “People are now being released or processed in six months or six weeks, depending on which boat you came on,” Moore said.

The *WSWS* spoke to Paul Boylan, the solicitor representing the six Iranian asylum seekers. He said frustrations in Woomera were a result of detainees being held for long periods without ever receiving a face-to-face interview for refuge status. They were also hundreds of kilometres from community support, family and decent education facilities.

“So, you are locked up in an area where you’re not getting information from the outside, in a system that you don’t know, in a language that you generally can’t speak. So, the frustration is just enormous and this has happened before. People self-mutilate.”

Boylan said protests had broken out regularly at Woomera, a site chosen as a rocket launching station in the 1940s because of its remoteness. The media rarely reported the protests, because of Woomera’s isolation and because the government bans access to the detention centre.



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