

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

9th June 2000

PROTESTS AT WOOMERA DETENTION CENTRE

The recent breakout of asylum seekers at Woomera Detention Centre is a potent reminder of the problems associated with immigration detention. Recently we have also seen threats of mass suicide from asylum seekers detained at Curtin Immigration Reception and Processing Centre. "These are the actions of desperate people who, having fled persecution in their own countries, suffer further hardship under Australia's much-criticised mandatory detention regime" said Council President, David Bitel. From the moment of their arrival in Australia these people, coming mainly from countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, have been detained in large facilities accommodating around 1,000 individuals and families that are located in more remote parts of Australia. Most have been detained for nearly six months. This lengthy time in detention has been marked by the absence of information about their future.

Australia's policy of detaining for the duration of the determination process all asylum seekers who arrive without permission to enter, sets it aside from all other western countries. This policy breaches our international obligations and has been criticised by the UN Human Rights Commission, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Amnesty International and many other human rights bodies. In addition, asylum seekers in detention, if successful in their application for refugee status, will only be granted 3 year temporary protection visas and be denied access to most settlement services. As David Bitel has said "we cannot continue to impose these draconian policies on people seeking asylum and not face the consequences".

The Refugee Council has long called for a more humane reception for asylum seekers who arrive in Australia without adequate documentation. The Council has put forward an alternative to detention that takes into account the circumstances of the individual.

The Alternative Detention Model centres on the presumption that applicants for refugee status who arrive in Australia without adequate documentation will be released from detention within three months of arrival after having satisfied certain conditions. These include verification of the person's identity, lodgement of a claim for refugee status, assessment of their security check

and a health check. Most importantly, the alternative detention model allows for greater flexibility, enhanced equity, provides closer harmony with international guidelines and would dramatically reduce compliance costs as these people would spend significantly less time in detention.

While we continue to make Australia as unpalatable as possible for potential asylum seekers, we fail to recognise that behind the wire fences of detention, hidden far from our view, are people for whom we must find a more effective and compassionate response. At present, our response has been to detain, deter and deny permanent protection. The Refugee Council of Australia urges that the Alternative Detention Model be considered as a more humanitarian response.