



Refugee Council
of Australia

August 16, 2008

NEW HIGH SECURITY DETENTION CENTRE UNSUITABLE FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

Representatives of nine non-government organisations have signed a joint letter to Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, expressing concern about “the high security, prison-like character” of the new \$400 million Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre.

The letter – signed by representatives of A Just Australia, Amnesty International Australia, Asylum Seekers Centre of NSW, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Foundation House (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture), Jesuit Refugee Service Australia, Immigration Advice and Rights Centre and the Refugee Council of Australia – follows a visit to the new detention centre this week by Government officials and non-government organisation representatives.

The letter writers describe the new detention centre as “an extremely harsh and stark environment to detain people seeking asylum while their applications for protection are determined”.

“The very expensive security systems of the facility are quite unnecessary for the population who may be detained there. There were many better uses for the \$400 million the facility cost and the additional millions required for its upkeep even while empty,” the letter said.

“The damage that has been done to people's mental and physical health by detaining them in remote high security detention centres such as this has been documented repeatedly and is acknowledged by the government's new immigration detention policy.

“We inspected alternative detention arrangements including duplexes situated in the community and the previous Phosphate Hill detention facility which has recently had a number of the fences removed. We welcome (the Immigration Minister's) announcement that people are brought to the island would be placed in these facilities rather than the detention centre, which would only be used as a last resort.

“The journey to Christmas Island, a five hour flight from Perth, reinforced for us its remoteness from the providers of services that are so important to ensuring the wellbeing of asylum seekers and the protection of their rights. Access to specialist services and casework support, including torture trauma counselling and expert legal advice will be restricted if not impossible.

“The immigration facilities including the vastly expensive centre are a product of the policy of excision. Our visit underscored for us how unfair and potentially harmful the policy is, despite some ameliorative measures announced by (the Immigration Minister) as part of the new detention policy. We strongly affirm our view that all asylum seekers should be entitled to have their applications for protection determined under the procedures that apply on the mainland.”

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The Refugee Council of Australia represents
non-government organisations and
individuals working with and for refugees
in Australia and around the world

August 15, 2008

Senator Chris Evans
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Joint letter re Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre

Dear Minister,

Representatives of the organisations listed below visited Christmas Island this week to inspect the facilities for detaining and processing unauthorised arrivals. We appreciate the invitation and assistance of the Australian Government and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to undertake the visit and offer the following observations.

The new immigration detention facility

The most striking experience of the visit was the high security, prison-like character of the new immigration detention facility. It is an extremely harsh and stark environment to detain people seeking asylum while their applications for protection are determined. The very expensive security systems of the facility are quite unnecessary for the population who may be detained there. There were many better uses for the \$400 million the facility cost and the additional millions required for its upkeep even while empty.

The damage that has been done to people's mental and physical health by detaining them in remote high security detention centres such as this has been documented repeatedly and is acknowledged by the government's new immigration detention policy.

Alternative detention arrangements

We inspected alternative detention arrangements including duplexes situated in the community and the previous Phosphate Hill detention facility which has recently had a number of the fences removed. We welcome your announcement that people are brought to the island would be placed in these facilities rather than the detention centre, which would only be used as a last resort.

The remoteness of Christmas Island

The journey to Christmas Island, a five hour flight from Perth, reinforced for us its remoteness from the providers of services that are so important to ensuring the wellbeing of asylum seekers and the protection of their rights.

Access to specialist services and casework support, including torture trauma counselling and expert legal advice will be restricted if not impossible.

Excision

The immigration facilities including the vastly expensive centre are a product of the policy of excision.

Our visit underscored for us how unfair and potentially harmful the policy is, despite some ameliorative measures announced by you as part of the new detention policy.

We strongly affirm our view that all asylum seekers should be entitled to have their applications for protection determined under the procedures that apply on the mainland. There should be no discrimination on the basis of the way asylum seekers reach Australian territory. In this way Australia will be best placed to ensure that those in need of protection are not returned to countries where they would face torture or death.

Yours sincerely,

A Just Australia
Amnesty International Australia
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
Asylum Seekers Centre of NSW
Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office
Foundation House (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture)
Immigration Advice and Rights Centre
Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
Refugee Council of Australia