



Refugee Council of Australia

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INCREASE IN LONG-TERM DETENTION AT HEART OF UNREST

The Australian Government's asylum policies have resulted in a 1400% increase in long-term detention in just one year, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) says.

RCOA chief executive officer Paul Power said that, while the number of immigration detainees grew by 196%, those detained for longer than six months grew seven times faster – from 258 in March 2010 to 3,901 in March 2011.

“The Government has been warned again and again by its advisory bodies, mental health specialists and refugee organisations that an increase in long-term detention would result in more incidents of self-harm and increased unrest in detention centres,” Mr Power said. “Unfortunately, these warnings have proven to be correct.

“By introducing tougher laws for actions inside detention centres, the Government is focusing on the side effect not on the root cause of the problem.

“It has been well documented that long-term detention creates mental health problems. This is borne out in different ways: depression, self harm, suicide and lashing out at the system itself. RCOA does not condone the recent violence in detention centres but we are not entirely surprised, given the factors at hand.

“Presently, and even in his own words, the Minister for Immigration has ‘very extensive’ powers to deal with people in detention convicted of a crime, including criminal damage. There is no need to bolster these powers with legislation that could see them widened to include refugees who commit more minor offences while in the pressure cooker environment of long-term detention. Our concern is that a refugee who commits one misdemeanour could be denied protection and unity with his or her family for life.”

Mr Power said that, in examining alternatives, Australia must look closely at policies employed by nations such as Sweden, Canada, South Africa, Belgium and the United States.

“There are countries which receive five or 10 times the number of asylum seekers received by Australia and manage to have short, defined periods of detention for health, security and identity checks after which people are released to live in the community to await refugee status determination,” he said. “It would be more humane and far more cost effective for Australia to implement systems such as these. In turn, such systems would greatly reduce the likelihood of further unrest and suicides in our detention centres.

“Seeking asylum by any means is not a crime in Australian or international law and keeping people locked up for doing so is inhumane. It really is time the Government acknowledged that our system is broken and looked to constructive alternatives rather than creating further punishments for vulnerable people.”

People in immigration detention	12 March 2010	11 March 2011	Change
Less than 3 months	1475	1076	-27%
3 – 6 months	574	1842	221%
More than 6 months	258	3901	1412%
Total	2307	6819	196%

Source: http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/_pdf/immigration-detention-statistics-20110311.pdf and 2010 DIAC public statistics.

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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