

**The following article is the transcript of an interview conducted by student journalists from UTS Online Journalist, way back in 2003. Much of the content is now out of date but it does provide an interesting historical reminder of the harsh policies introduced by the Australia Government in regard to unauthorized asylum seekers who arrived on our shores.**

**FATHER JIM CARTY is the coordinator at the House of Welcome, a drop-in centre in Carramar, Western Sydney. The centre is a converted butcher's shop along a street of busy shops and businesses run by Vietnamese who were once refugees.**

**Father Carty has worked with refugees for years, in Japan and in Hong Kong. The centre is a "place of safety and security for people to come in who have been released from detention centres," Father Carty tells us. "Apart from TPV holders, we include two other groups who are in greater need because they receive no services from the government whatsoever. They are the habeas corpus cases; those who are released from detention by a court order and the other group called bridging Visa E category". Habeas corpus cases are "Persona Nullius", he says; without benefit, settlement support or permission to work; in Australia they are non persons".**

### **The House of Welcome**

#### **Tell us about the House of Welcome and your work**

It was established by the NSW Ecumenical Council. It is a drop-in centre, a place of safety and security for people to come in who have been released from detention centres.

We try to be with them in these uncertain times especially as they receive their 30-month letter and interview. We support them and help them prepare for that interview. On top of that we provide welfare assistance to the habeas corpus cases, though there are very few, about 18 that we know of.

We have six people on our books that we provide funding for. We have family support. For the children we have English and computer classes. We help with job search, access to information; we have an Arabic speaking worker and referrals to legal and healthcare.

#### **How many do you work with?**

We send out a newsletter to 211 addresses, it would represent 260-270 people. Our caseload is small compared to the number of people out there. I was told that in regards to the current refugee issue, never has there been so many, doing so much for so few, and achieving so little results. A professor from the ANU said that and there's a truth to it.

I was told that there are 150 organisations in NSW alone trying to respond to the variety of needs. We are connected and work with a variety of org such as STARTTS, the Refugee Council of Australia, Asylum Seekers Centre and the Jesuit Refugee Centre.

### **Temporary Protection Visa Holders in NSW**

#### **How many TPV holders are there in NSW?**

As of the 24th of September 2003, there are 3873 TPV cases in NSW. 2517 have received their letter, what they call the 30-month letter. It means their current visa will expire in 6 months and they must renegotiate with the government to prove that the government has an obligation to continue to offer them protection.

### **Permanent protection?**

Well, no. This is the very interesting development about TPVs. It is possible that they may get an extension of the TPV for another three years. When they get that letter, they are told that until they receive their interview, they are given an XC, an extension of their TPV, but the extension is unlimited (and undated). It could be for a day, five days, one year. It's terrible.

### **How soon will they know?**

There is a backlog of interviews. Of 2517 who have received their 30 month letter, in Sydney, they have only interviewed 186 people in 6 months. You have this caseload of 2000 people, but at that rate, these people are sitting around in limbo for years before they are even interviewed. Meanwhile if things change in Iraq or Iran or Afghanistan, to the satisfaction of the government, not necessarily to the satisfaction of the people who fled persecution, they could be sent home.

The interesting thing is that of those 186 who have been interviewed in Sydney, and 70 in Brisbane, their final determination is still pending. But 65 of them have received another letter. 61 have been refused. Their application for an extension of TPV is denied. Now they may be sent home.

### **How do they go about getting information?**

It's one of the services we provide here. We keep an on-going account of all the information that is available through the Internet and various agencies like Amnesty.

We keep a record of that, so that when their time comes, we can give them the information to help them prepare their case.

We're not legal people, so we direct them towards, the free refugee service.

### **Australian Detention versus Japan and Hong Kong**

**How does Australian refugee treatment compare to those in the countries you've worked in?** To my shame, the Australian scene is worse than any other place that I've been. Japan was fine. The Japanese government didn't do anything for 10 yrs because they didn't know what to do with refugees, but they allowed us to run our camps. They were open camps, the refugees were allowed to work, children could get to school. It worked well.

The camps in Hong Kong were initially open, but as the numbers increased, they got overwhelmed and they started building camps similar to what we've got, on their little islands. Various countries, like America, Canada, Australia, Norway processed many of them and took them in as refugees. For the residual numbers - they introduced the concept of economic refugee - but they couldn't operate an open door policy and some were sent back.

### **What about the conditions of the camps there and the ones here?**

For the camps in Hong Kong, there was always the expectation that they would be eventually processed and would get to the other countries who were receiving them.

Here in Australia, there was this sudden imposition of this draconian policy of mandatory detention for all who arrive here. The government says "illegally", but it is not illegal to flee persecution, quite the contrary.

It is not illegal to land on the doorstep of a country that has signed the UN convention. If you can prove you are a genuine refugee, then signatory countries like Australia is obligated to look after you.

## **Australian Anger**

### **What is the sentiment of the Australia community?**

I gave a talk to 200 students at the Australia Catholic University a month or so ago and explained to them what the situation was as I understood it. One student as she was going out of the hall was heard to say, 'well at least we feed them'. She wouldn't be alone in that mentality.

There is a lot of anger in the Australian community when they [the refugees] started burning the buildings inside the camps. They're saying, 'here we build these wonderful camps for them and they run around inside and show their appreciation by burning them'. It's an absurd argument.

### **What's your response to this?**

These people have fled persecution. 87-percent of the cases that have come here by boat have been shown to be refugees. Because of mandatory detention, we are denying them freedom for three, four years.

A cage is a cage. If you flee persecution on the expectation that you are going to be free and you arrive at a country that has or had a reputation for being open and free – all that fair go – and the first thing that happens is that you're stuck in the hold of a ship and taken and locked up behind barbed wire with little or no understanding [of what's happening] and in there indefinitely.

It is the indefinite detention and uncertainty that is the injustice.

On top of that we are incarcerating children. We are the only Western nation who is locking children up who have committed no crime. It's no crime to flee persecution.

Villawood, during the time when the Vietnamese came, was an open village. People came and were given time for transition while they got used to Australia. It was a transitional housing complex. Now we've put barbed wire around it and locked people up. They don't know how long they will be there. A young man came in today and told us he had just been released after four years in Villawood. He's 31 now and he's been given a permanent protection visa. But it's been four years of his life wasted.

### **Could the Australian public fear that migrants and refugees will take away jobs?**

They did a survey in Brisbane on the Vietnamese and the economy and society. They came up with interesting figures. They found that 1 in 7 Australians suffered from depression. They expected to find a higher number in the Vietnamese community because they came from places of trauma, but they found it was only 1 in 13. And this is because they were given welcome and an opportunity to use their skills when they arrived here. They've done very nicely. They looked at the cost and found that the contribution they [the Vietnamese Refugees] made to the economy was five times the money spent on their settlement and services.

A psychiatrist in Nauru said that the refugees were one of the most resourceful people she'd ever met.

## **Life in the Camps**

### **What's life in the camps like?**

The camps feed people; they do provide a certain amount of education. But for the children over 15, there's nothing for them. They sit and they wait.

I visited Curtin camp in WA and this one young lad was 17-years-old, he's spent two-and-a-half years in the camp. He could not access any educational programs. Mr Ruddock will tell you, yes we do have educational programs. But what does that mean? It could mean as much as one hour a day, or an hour a week... There is no organised ongoing program.

**What do the refugees feel about the policies?**

They are very angry. I met one fellow who was on the Tampa [he was accepted as a refugee] in NZ and he was happy as could be, but he asked, 'why are the Australian army so brutal to us? They forced us off the boat and kicked us.'

**How about the rest of the refugees on the Tampa?**

That is the irony; only some of them were accepted as refugees. The rest of them were sent to Nauru. And some of them have gone back to Afghanistan.

I've visited Nauru. How could anyone have survived there? It is a rock and an empty place.

We used financial inducements to get a sovereign government to break its own law. They have a bill of rights, but what they are doing to those people is against that bill of rights. But we paid money for that to happen.

**REFUGEE STORIES: Working with refugees for so many years, Father Carty has seen much. Everyday he hears and sees stories of refugees, some filled with joy, but a lot are stories of frustration and pain; Too many to recount here. He finished the interview with this one:**

**“Some of the refugees have to deal with grief and trauma only few of us can imagine:**

One such case was Mohammed (not his real name). Soon after his release from detention he came to the House of Welcome for help. In the coming months he spoke of his parents and family he had left behind and the sadness of separation. I will never forget the day he came to tell us the horrific news that his mother, father, two brothers, their wives and their eight children, were blown to pieces in a bombing run during the 2nd Gulf War. Dried eyed he shared his story. Such was his grief; such was his torment I don't think he had any tears left to shed.