

**Locked in- Locked out was written in March 2002 by the current Coordinator of the House Of Welcome, Jim Carty, and was printed in the Canberra Times and the Catholic Weekly.**

"Demonised, isolated, imprisoned -asylum seekers in Australia's detention centres are people with lives in limbo and stories unheard. With persistence, Jim Carty SM went behind the wire fence at Curtin Camp to give a name to a family who are otherwise known only by their serial numbers"

## **LOCKED IN - LOCKED OUT**

"I was just passing by and thought I'd drop in", offered as a reason for visiting the Curtin Detention Centre would be disingenuous in the extreme.

To get there I take a flight from Sydney to Perth, from Perth to Broome, and in a hire car drive over 200 kilometres northwards towards Derby on a road that undulates through the flat, relentless expanse of low scrub, giant termite mounds and occasional stands of bulbous boab trees.

About 40 kilometres short of Derby, the turnoff is signposted 'to Curtin Air Force Base' with a warning that unauthorised persons may not enter. I follow this road for another 10 kilometres, the feeling of isolation all pervading, a sense that this road leads nowhere – a rather sad metaphor for the lives of the hapless and desperate people I've come to visit.

An unmanned gate indicates the perimeter of the Air Force Base and the camp comes into view about 500 metres further on. It's a view all too familiar from the TV news- tall double-chain link fences topped with coils of shining razor wire; the forbidding features of Australia's detention camps. Like Woomera, the camp at Curtin is made up of box-like demountables sitting in a sea of red dust. Unlike Woomera, at Curtin a few trees break the monotony of the surroundings.

Access to the camp is granted only after a detainee has requested permission, in writing, to be visited by a designated person. A corresponding letter from the intended visitor is sent in advance to the camp manager indicating the reasons for the visit. All this had been done in advance.

And so to the customary ID checks and signing in, after which I'm taken to what surely must be a temporary visiting area- a pathway linking some of the buildings, thankfully covered, which helps to alleviate the persistent heat if not the flies of our northern desert. Guards and other personnel trek by at irregular intervals.

The Avesta Family, who had requested my visit, are summoned, not by name, but by number (each detainee is given a number at the time of arrival) to come to the visitors area. Like all the other detainees in Curtin, they are locked in one of the four separate secure sections inside the camp's main perimeter.

The Avestas are Iranian - Hossein and Susan are the parents, Parviz their 17 year-old- son, and Shana their 13 year-old daughter. For the next two hours, and on two subsequent visits, I sit and listen to their story, a story all too familiar for those of us who have had the privilege and the opportunity of meeting, listening and talking to detainees - to asylum seekers.

The saddest part of the story for me was not the pain and suffering leaving their homeland has caused them, not the danger of the perilous journey they made to Indonesia, or the even more perilous journey on an unseaworthy boat to reach Australia, but the fact that the family had been locked up first for a short time in the detention camp on Christmas Island, and then transferred to Curtin Camp where they have been waiting for the last two years and three months, up to the time of my visit in early February. As I write, they are still there.

They have been screened out, that is to say, their application for refugee status has been rejected. The Australian Government insists that their only option is to return to Iran. However, the father is convinced that to do so would place his family and himself in greater danger than they were in when he took the original decision to leave his homeland. Unless the family signs an agreement, the Australian Government cannot forcibly return them to Iran, but while ever they stay in Australia they will (according to the present government's policy) remain in detention.

The two years and three months that the Avesta Family has lived in Curtin Detention Camp has been a time of great suffering and distress. The children, like other children of all ages in the camp, have witnessed some of the drastic actions taken by other detainees, for example the physical and psychological impact on those who have been on long hunger strikes, self mutilation, sewing of lips, and on one occasion an attempted self hanging from a tree.

Like all detainees, the family are subject to frequent musters and nighttime head counts. On one occasion the family were separated into four different compounds for over a month. In desperation, to reunite his family, the father threatened to cut his throat with a broken piece of glass unless the camp manager relented.

The son Parviz has become deeply depressed and withdrawn. For him and other youth of his age there is no formal education. The critically important developmental years, age 16 and 17, have been spent sitting behind the razor wire gazing off into what must look like an empty horizon, with nothing to do. No stimulation, no education, just total boredom and frustration.

Shana was more fortunate in that she was allowed to go with a small group of children to the local school in Derby because she was under 15. Within two months she was top of her class. But that was to change.

With growing despair for himself and his family, Parviz decided to go on a hunger strike, sewing up his lips in protest. Shana joined him in the hunger strike and for 25 days they went without solid food.

Only when forcibly taken from their parents and locked in isolation and being threatened with forced nose-tube feeding, did the children break their hunger strike. Parviz cut out his own stitches from his lips, which were by then very badly infected. For the first 10 days or so, they were unable to keep food down. As punishment for being a naughty girl, Shana was forbidden to go back to school. At the time of my visit, she was still being punished.

During the hours I spend with the Avesta Family, I am struck by the courtesy and hospitality they extended to me. In spite of their anguish, in spite their sufferings, in spite of the uncertainty of their future they remain calm, friendly and respectful, declining any offers of gifts.

In February there were over 500 detainees in Curtin. Like the Avesta family, many have been screened out, rejected as refugees and now live locked up behind the razor wire, frustrated and despairing as the hours, the days, the weeks, the months and the years pass them by. Their lives are in permanent stagnation. They are locked away in isolation, indeed

in desolation in some of the most remote parts of Australia and most Australians are locked out of their lives. Most Australians are denied access to them, unable to become their friends, unable to hear their stories, see their faces, unable to offer simple gestures of help.

For many Australians - some suggest a majority - they are locked out of our hearts, locked out of our humanitarian outreach, our compassion, locked out because of the ongoing, thorough, deliberate vilification and demonising of these people. They have been stereotyped as "queue jumpers", "possible terrorists", "people with diseases", "people who are brutal to their children" - "these are not the kinds of people we want in our country".

The government propaganda has been highly successful. Long before the Tampa incident, long before September 11th, long before the now discredited statements about children thrown overboard and parents sewing up the lips of their children, there has been a calculated policy to describe the asylum seekers always in negative terms. Even though Australian men and women are fighting in Afghanistan, our Navy enforcing a blockade on Iraq because of the brutality of regimes in these countries, rarely is the terror that caused most of these people to leave their homes mentioned. It's as though once they have left Afghanistan or Iraq the cause of their leaving is forgotten or ignored.

This propaganda has rekindled in the Australian society the fear of the foreigner, particularly the dark foreigner whose language we cannot understand. Like the "wogs" the "dagos" the "slope-heads" before them, we have quickly labelled them with a demeaning term - "rag heads". It is indeed the White Australia Policy revisited. The scabs of the wounds of past prejudices and racism have been roughly scraped off, revealing the rawness of those embarrassing flaws in our national character and social fabric.

Of this development, the social commentator Robert Manne in an article entitled 'Refugees without a Refuge', which appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald wrote: *"Over the past several weeks some 2000 refugees, mainly from the Middle East, have arrived in boats on the north-west coast of Australia. I cannot recollect an occasion in which a refugee group has been greeted with such unremitting and such undeserved hostility."*

Manne's article appeared not in recent months, but on December 13th, 1999, over 18 months before the incidents referred to above. The stage was being set for the cold, hard-hearted policy, which is now firmly in place.

In the late 70s and throughout the 80s Australia warmly embraced refugees from Vietnam and more recently, from Kosovo and East Timor. Why has Australia changed? Why are we now acting so mean spiritedly? We are not talking big numbers here, such as were processed in 1998 in the UK (50,000); in Germany (100,000); in the US and Canada (420,000). We are talking about no more than 8,000-10,000.

Does compassion only follow the TV cameras? We recall the Ethiopian famine and Bob Geldof. TV showed us very graphically the conditions from which the Vietnamese, the Kosovans, the Chinese students from Tianamen Square and the East Timorese fled - and we warmly embraced them. Sadly, the TV cameras are locked out of the camps. We hear of the protests within. We see the plumes of smoke rising behind the wire fences through a zoom lens. We are kept at a safe our distance from these strangers in the desert, and yet I tell you, he is my brother; she is my sister.

Jim Carty sm

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