

# The Waiting Game

## A special report

*Social Issues briefing #015, 24/6/2004.*

*This is a lucrative business, we're talking here about detaining men, women and children in prison-like conditions, as a business. And so certainly from the perspective of companies that are engaged in this kind of work, they would be looking to [governments] and saying, 'Well we can expand into this market'. [Liza Schuster, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at Oxford University.]"*

*For those who've come across the seas, we've boundless plains to share.*  
[Australian National Anthem]

*Time is the longest distance between two places.* [Tennessee Williams]

Think back for a moment to a three or four-year period in your life. It could be the time that you spent at school or college or university. Or the seemingly interminable stretch in childhood between ages 7 and 11. Or perhaps the time when your children were born until they started pre-school. It has been four years since the last Olympic Games. And remember back to the time when we didn't know the effects the new millennium would have on computer systems around the world? That was a little over four years ago!

Four years is a long time—for anyone. Fortunately for most of us, we have had plenty of things to fill in the past four years—schooling, university, jobs, houses, raising children, shopping, cooking, gardening, spending time with family and friends, church activities, ministries.

Yet there are some people in Australia who have spent the past four years waiting.

For asylum seekers in Australia, waiting is a part of life. Sadly, the waiting has gone on far too long for many people.

I spent some time with asylum seekers at Villawood Immigration Detention Centre recently. And while it was not a great deal of time, it was enough to give me an insight into some of the conditions that they live in and the realities of their lives here in Australia.

When you arrive at Villawood Detention Centre there are many things that assault your senses. On the June morning of my visit, the temperature seems to be about 10 degrees lower than in the surrounding parts of Sydney. The area where the detention centre is located is dry and dusty. Surrounded by an industrial zone and building sites, it is a far cry from the comforting suburbia that most of us enjoy. Razor wire fences, 4.2 metres tall, surround all of the detention areas. There is a second fence within the outside fences, and sandwiched between them are rolls of security wire. The metal fences keep freedom out, but allow the cold wind and the dust in. Spotlights are mounted on the perimeter of the fences. All in all it is grey, bleak, uninviting.

The waiting game, for visitors, begins then. Generally visitors start arriving at 10am, even though the gates open for visiting at 1.30pm, give or take. It is a case of first in, best dressed. So visitors sit and wait. (the majority of detainees currently at Villawood are those who have breached their visa conditions, with a lesser number of asylum seekers) A two-and-a-half year old little boy who visits his father in detention has learnt the ritual of sitting in his stroller for two or three hours until the guards open the gates. Amongst his two-year-old vocabulary are words such as "officer", "detention", "guards", and "visiting".

The wind howls, the dust blows, conversation waxes and wanes with other visitors who become familiar faces day after day, week after week. Finally the guards appear and run through the do's and don'ts. 'Do' make sure you have filled out your visiting form correctly, do make sure you have appropriate identification. 'Don't' bring your wallet, handbag, mobile phone, metal objects or more than ten dollars in change.

Visitors are allowed in five at a time, and are led through a series of metal gates and corridors. Each visitor is attended by a guard. Visiting forms are checked, pockets are emptied. If you are taking a bag with anything in it for the detainees it is thoroughly searched (visitors are allowed to bring small amounts of food for detainees, as well as some other approved things—some games,

books, etc). After a hospital-like tag is attached to your wrist, and your hand is stamped, you are led through a metal detector to another room. Here you wait for a guard to check the stamp on your hand and open a heavy metal door. Once through that door another officer records the number on your wrist tag and the time that you came through the door. Then that officer unlocks another gate which opens to the visiting area. The process is impersonal and perfunctory. Perhaps it is different for visitors who come every week and get to know the process and the officers working there. But the facts remain—visitors are given a number. All your personal possessions are kept by the officer in a little bag with your assigned number on it. And if the visitor application process made me feel less than human, I can only imagine what it does to people who have lived in those conditions for the past few years.

The visiting area is a large outdoor yard, surrounded by razor wire fences and separated from the section housing the detainees by more razor wire fences and locked gates. Faded plastic chairs and tables are scattered around. There is some thinning grass and a play area for children.

A loudspeaker booms out the names of detainees who have visitors, and they make their way from their living quarters to the visiting yard.

So many of the things that happen in detention centres appear to be instituted to dehumanize the detainees—such as roll calls four times a day—the first one at 6am and the last one of the day at 8pm. Everyone is relieved that the 2am roll call has been abandoned! Sometimes, the detainees have to wait outside their rooms while the inspection is being completed. It can get very cold, especially at the 8pm roll call. Sometimes roll call and inspection can take up to ninety minutes. If any of the detainees need to take medicine, they have to wait until roll call is over, and only then can they go down to the dispensary to get their medicine—which means that if they are sick enough to need medicine, they have to wait outside in the cold while roll call is being completed and then they have to walk down to get their medicine and then walk back in the cold.

It is hard to imagine what it is like to be surrounded by locked gates and razor wire fences, or to endure the endless waiting. Some detainees spoke of waiting for periods of seven months after putting in an appeal to the Court with not a word on the progress of their appeal. Many of the detainees have learnt English while they have been in detention in Australia.

A fifteen year old Iranian asylum seeker told me that they had everything they needed in their living facilities – television, clothes, food. Everything, that is, except freedom. Freedom to walk beyond the fences. Freedom to go to the shops. Freedom to visit with friends. Freedom for her father to work.

We take for granted the ability to go to the shops to buy things such as food and clothing. For asylum seekers being held in Villawood, shopping is a luxury they have not enjoyed in Australia. When they need new clothes, they have to fill out an order form. The only time the children leave the compound is to go to school (or on rare, closely-supervised excursions). They are dropped at school and are picked up again—no visiting friends after school, no sleepovers, no going to the movies with friends on the weekend, no cricket or soccer on Saturday mornings.

One woman related to me the almost unbearable nature of the long, empty hours of every day. Some of the men work in the gardens or the kitchen, and are paid in ten-dollar phone cards. But the uncertainty of the future, and the many years already spent in detention are taking their toll.

In a recent report into the mental health of asylum seekers in Villawood Detention Centre, this comment was made:

As the period of detention continues, life is increasingly punctuated by feelings of loss and grief arising from the release of compatriots who have been successful in their refugee claims or the forcible removal from Australia of those who have been unsuccessful. These stresses are combined with the ever-present anxiety about the wellbeing of family members left behind. Some may experience guilt for having left their family to secure their own survival and protection, for not yet being able to work and send money home to assist their family, and for not being able to sponsor them to the safety of Australia.

There is little to hope in, and yet they must continue to hope. The presence of visitors and family members are a very important element in keeping their hopes alive. It is a time when they can enjoy laughter, company, sitting with friends, a brief respite from the all-pervasive cloud of despondency that hangs over them. And yet the visitors, whose dedication and love is humbling, must leave. Yet again.

According to the ancient law of Israel, ‘Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow’ [Deut. 27:19]. Hundreds of years later, this curse rebounded on Israel. ‘The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. ... So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD’ [Ezek. 22:29,31].

The majority of asylum seekers in detention have cleared security checks (usually completed within the first few weeks of arriving in Australia), but are held in detention while courts decide whether to overturn Department of Immigration decisions not to grant refugee status. Since the Department’s decisions are able to be overturned, the practice of detention, and the waiting times we are seeing, come perilously close to ‘withholding justice from the alien’ amongst us. We may be hearing a modern-day echo of the collusive practices spoken of by Ezekiel – especially as we learn of the financial benefit that some people reap by keeping people locked up and waiting.

The Minister for Immigration says that waiting times will be reduced as eight new Federal Court judges are engaged, to hear more appeals. But waiting times will tell if this measure is enough; indeed, it is unclear why people need to be detained after their security checks, and while their appeals are being considered.

Surely six months is the longest time that any innocent person should be required to live in conditions like those I saw at Villawood.

*Tracy Gordon, for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

**Sources/Further Reading:**

A. Sultan and K Sullivan, “Psychological disturbances in asylum seekers held in long term detention: a participant-observer account”, *MJA* 2001; 175: 593-596 found at: [http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/175\\_12\\_171201/sultan/sultan.html](http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/175_12_171201/sultan/sultan.html)

“The Detention Industry”, *Background Briefing*, produced by Tom Morton and aired on Radio National, Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2004; transcript online at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s1137813.htm>. (A link elsewhere on [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au), allows the program to be heard via internet streaming radio.)

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