

DCI Media Release: CHILDREN IN IMMIGRATION DETENTION

On 29 August DCI released excerpts of correspondence sent to The Hon Philip Ruddock MP, Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs about the Woomera and Curtin Detention Centres.

The Australian President of Defence for Children International (DCI), Mr. Danny Sandor, said that it had taken this unusual step out of a concern to reinforce the need for continuing human rights assessments, that are independent from Government, of immigration detainees.

The letter of 27 June highlighted concerns about the abuse of children in the Centres and drew attention to:

- * the problem of "invisibility" of child refugees (as pointed out by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees) and the added duty of care that falls on the Government as a result;

- * the lack of any clear protocols or articulated processes whereby child protection concerns can be investigated;

- * the differing child protection reporting requirements between the States/Territories (in South Australia, for example, reporting is mandatory for persons caring for children; in Western Australia it is not);

- * the need to provide adequate training for the private contractors who "run" the detention centres on their obligation to report children "at risk";

- * the need for regular visits by State/Territory based child welfare agencies;

- * the need to better address the emotional well-being of refugee children in detention, many of whom could well have experienced separation, trauma and loss;

- * the need for a transparent, independent system of monitoring the welfare of child refugees in detention whether accompanied or not."

The letter urged the establishment of an independent review/monitoring process which would conform with the Government's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"This would reassure Australians that children in detention centres were being properly cared for and provide the Government with immediate feedback on any emerging problems. A review panel(s) is one approach. Such a panel(s) would include a representative from the local statutory child welfare authority; a person knowledgeable in child mental health; a person with the appropriate cultural knowledge; a representative from a respected children's agency such as UNICEF; a representative from a refugee advocacy body and an Immigration representative."

"In addition, we would ask you to seriously consider that a designated representative be appointed to act for every child refugee claimant, accompanied or not, as occurs in Canada. The representative would be required to act in

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"loco parentis" in the absence of a traditional caregiver, bridging the gap between the substantive legal considerations and the child's care and well-being."

"May we further suggest that your Department convene a meeting of key stakeholders to discuss the needs and welfare of refugee child detainees and discuss the proposals raised in this letter. Defence for Children International would be pleased to work with you to provide a solution to what has become an issue of national concern."

Mr. Sandor said "We are awaiting a reply from the Minister.

In light of recent events, we would underline that the stakeholders, meeting must appreciate that the well-being of detained children is critically dependent on the treatment of not just the children but the adults around them. One can only begin to imagine the distress the children suffered during the Woomera turmoil."



Danny Sandor