

An eyewitness account of the Woomera Detention Centre

Tom Sherman, former head of the National Crime Authority, shares his experience of a rare visit to the Woomera Detention Centre in March this year.

I visited Woomera Detention Centre on 7 and 8 March 2002 at the invitation of Jeremy Moore, an Adelaide-based lawyer who, with a number of other volunteers, provides legal services to detainees. I was inside the centre for about 12 hours over the two-day period, interviewing detainees who were appealing adverse decisions on refugee status. I was also able to talk to a number of persons who represented the various groups of detainees about the conditions at Woomera, as well as being able to observe at least some of the conditions myself.

It is important to appreciate that the following comments are only a "snap shot" view of the centre. Much may have changed since I was there. For example, I understand that a considerable number of detainees have now been processed and are no longer at the centre. Also, Woomera has a limited life. A new purpose-built detention centre is in the final stages of construction at Port Augusta and, when it is completed, the Woomera detainees will be transferred there and Woomera will be closed.

At the time of my visit there were about 500 detainees (including about 80 children) at the centre, the great bulk of whom were boat people. Of this total, there were about 200

from Afghanistan, 180 from Iraq, 110 from Iran, five from Palestine, three from Turkey and two from Vietnam.

Woomera is about six hours drive north-north-west from Adelaide on a route through Port Pirie and Port Augusta. The centre itself is about two kilometres outside the township of Woomera.

The centre is surrounded by high security fences with razor wire at the top. Within the centre there are several compounds where the detainees are housed, for example, all single men were in the one compound. Movement between compounds is controlled by guards. In each compound there are a number of huts called "dongas". The huts have a door at each end with a corridor running down the middle. On both sides of the corridor there are spaces consisting of two double bunks with about 0.75 metres between the bunks. These spaces are separated by curtains.

Outside the huts, shade was at a premium as was seating and ground cover. I only saw one properly constructed sun shelter although there were a number of shelters constructed by the detainees with blankets and sheets. I could see only one small set of playground equipment for children but it was on hard dirt and no one seemed to be using the facility.

The detainees outside the huts were just sitting on the ground. There seemed to be no activity except for a couple of children playing with an old battered soccer ball. Some of the detainees had commenced a hunger strike on the Wednesday prior to my arrival. By the time of my arrival on the Friday they

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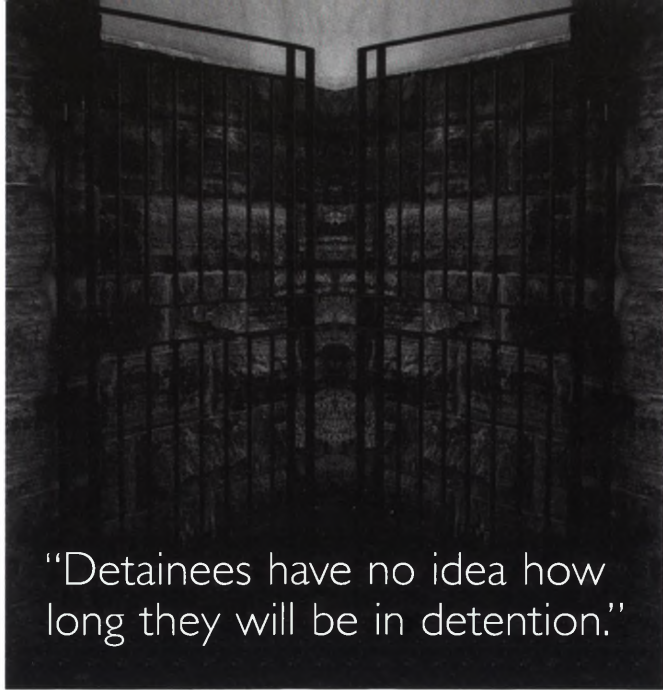
had been without food for two days. I was able to observe the hunger strike. Some of the strikers were lying on mattresses under temporary sun shelters, others were lying in shallow graves dug in the ground.

One inevitably relies on comparative experience when evaluating conditions at the centre and perhaps the most comparable experience is prison. The following evaluation is based on this comparison while accepting that detainees have never been convicted of any crime.

First, inmates of a prison are sentenced to prison for a specified period and they know that, with good behaviour, they can get reductions from the sentence. This enables them to look to the future with some certainty and plan accordingly. Detainees have no idea how long they will be in detention. Some people I interviewed had been in detention for over two years.

Second, inmates of a prison get feedback from the authorities on their prospects for early release and know when they can make application for such release. The most common complaint I received from detainees was that they received no feedback on the substance and timing of the refugee determination process. Even where detainees have received protection status they have to remain in detention for security clearances. They get no feedback on the progress of those clearances.

Third, prisoners receive a wide range of social and other support services while in prison. For example, they receive vis-



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its from family and friends, they have proper on-site medical facilities, they get regular religious services and counselling, they have educational opportunities up to university level, they have libraries, and they are provided with live entertainment from time to time. Detainees at Woomera rarely receive visitors, the on-site medical facility is rudimentary, and there are some visits from religious ministers based at Woomera but they are Christian where the great bulk of detainees are Muslim. Further, there is no program of education at the centre. There is some schooling for children under 12 but even that is totally inadequate. There is no library and only a handful of books seem to be in circulation.

Indeed the main source of books and toys for the children seems to be what few things that Jeremy Moore and his colleagues brought in with them on their visits.

Fourth, my experiences of the centre security staff were mixed. While interviews were going on, one member of the staff was inordinately officious towards the legal team. I saw one group of guards leaving the centre who seemed to be prime candidates for a motorcycle gang, which made me wonder whether there was any personality testing of guard applicants during recruitment. On the other hand, I saw a female guard perform a singular act of kindness towards a family of detainees.

Fifth, prisoners have at least some privacy and personal space when in their cells. Detainees have no privacy in the dongas and this seems to be a particular problem for families with children. Personal space seems to be non-existent in the dongas.

These comments have tended to concentrate on the physical conditions I was able to observe and learn from interviews. I have done this because not many people have the opportunity to go inside an Australian detention centre. I have not commented on the legal processes associated with refugee applications. There is already a substantial and growing body of scholarship on that subject. **PL**



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