

# Focusing inward

## on Australia's human rights obligations in the — lead up to the UN Special Session on Children

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INTERVIEW 1 (12 YEAR OLD GIRL)

**"I am getting crazy, I cut my hand. I can't talk to my mother. I can't talk to anyone and I am very tired. There is no solution for me – I just have to commit suicide – there is no choice."**

INTERVIEW 2 (16 YEAR OLD BOY)

**"Some of us, we not have anyone in here. What can we do except kill ourselves? If no-one help us, I kill myself. If I kill myself, at least I do something for the people."**

*FROM A MEDIA STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT PROFESSOR ALICE TAY AM AND DR SEV OZDOWSKI, HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONER OAM CONCERNING THE REPORT OF HREOC OFFICERS WHO VISITED THE WOOMERA IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTRE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA.*

World leaders will unite in New York in May to discuss creating a "World Fit for Children" at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children. Australia will be sending a delegation headed by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Hon Larry Anthony, and including other parliamentarians, two child representatives and a youth representative.

The Special Session on Children is an important milestone in assessing how far we have come over the last ten years, since the World Summit for Children, in addressing the problems affecting children around the world. UN Member States, as well as civil society representatives attending the Special Session, will reflect on areas where we have not fulfilled our aims and must double our efforts. The Special Session will also provide a unique opportunity for Australia to reaffirm and restate our commitment to children's human rights.

Australia's challenge is to look inward and ensure we are complying with our international human rights obligations towards children, and doing the best we can for children all around the world. One aspect

of our domestic law which has been called into question and received much media attention recently is the holding of child asylum seekers in immigration detention centres under the current Australian policy of mandatory detention. Last year there were 1103 children held in Australian immigration detention centres, out of a total of 8401 people overall. Some children were born in detention centres, while others lived there for months or years.

The Human Rights Commissioner, Dr Sev Ozdowski, has expressed deep concern in particular about the children housed at the Woomera Immigration Detention Centre in South Australia. In a media release, Dr Ozdowski said he was "specifically concerned about the media reports of children witnessing horrific incidents in detention, such as mouth sewing and hunger strikes." He also stated he was "alarmed by reports of children self-harming."

It is appropriate that, concurrent with Australia projecting a positive image in terms of Children's Rights at the Special Session, facets of Australian society are investigating just how accurate and universal that claim is. The Human Rights and Equal opportunities Commission (HREOC) is holding such an investigation through the *National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention* which aims to determine whether Australia's current treatment of child asylum seekers is complying with our human rights obligations.

Full details of the Inquiry, including terms of reference and background papers, can be found at [www.humanrights.gov.au/human\\_rights/children\\_detention/index.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/children_detention/index.html).

The closing date for submissions is 3 May 2002 and written submissions should be

emailed to [childrendetention@humanrights.gov.au](mailto:childrendetention@humanrights.gov.au) or sent to:

**National Inquiry into children in immigration detention**, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, GPO Box 5218, Sydney, NSW 1042

HREOC particularly welcomes submissions from children and young people. Details on how to prepare a submission are on the HREOC website. For those who do not feel able to make a submission but would like to put forward an opinion on this matter, the UN Youth Association is compiling opinions and experiences of young people through their website at [www.unya.asn.au](http://www.unya.asn.au).

If Australia intends to have a significant presence at the Special Session then we need to be able to demonstrate a true concern for children's rights and an exemplary child rights record. Hence it is imperative that the issue of children being detained within our borders be addressed in a manner that ensures we are fulfilling all of our human rights obligations and promoting the human rights of children in every way we can.

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For more information on children in detention and the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia:

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) – Questions Parents Ask about the Convention on the Rights of the Child [www.unicef.org/crc/parentsfaq.htm](http://www.unicef.org/crc/parentsfaq.htm).

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – Refugee Children: Their World at a Glance [www.unhcr.ch/children/index.html](http://www.unhcr.ch/children/index.html)

Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs [www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au)

Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs [www.dima.gov.au](http://www.dima.gov.au)

Refugee Council of Australia [www.refugeecouncil.org.au](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au)

Amnesty International Australia – Defending Children's Human Rights, Facts on Children in Detention [www.amnesty.org.au/whats happening/hrd4-5.html](http://www.amnesty.org.au/whats happening/hrd4-5.html)

ChiOut – Children Out of Detention is a parents group opposed to the mandatory detention of children in Australian detention centres.