



 A drawing by a detained child that was submitted to the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014

Editorial:

What are the limits of our generosity?

Aloysious Mowe SJ

Just before Christmas last year, the US Senate Select Intelligence Committee released its report on the C.I.A.'s Detention and Interrogation Program, and its use of torture on detainees between 2002 and 2006.

Among the report's key findings was the fact that the brutality of the torture and the harshness of the detention regime went beyond what the C.I.A. had reported to policy-makers (in other words, the C.I.A. deliberately misled its Senate overseers); that the C.I.A.'s claims for the

effectiveness of torture to obtain information that was vital for national security were inaccurate and unfounded; that the torture regime had damaged the standing of the United States, and resulted in significant costs, monetary and otherwise; that personnel were rarely reprimanded or held accountable for violations, inappropriate activities, and systematic and individual management failures.

The Intelligence Committee, while chaired by a Democrat, was bipartisan, and the report was endorsed by Republican Senator John McCain. Nevertheless, prominent Republicans attacked its findings, with present Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, characterising it as "ideologically motivated and distorted". The Senate Republican Whip, John Cornyn, said that torture had saved American lives, and

cont on p2

cont from p1 that “Senate Democrats should thank these brave men and women who worked to protect us – not vilify them”.

It was with a sense of déjà vu therefore that I heard the responses of the Australian government to the Australian Human Rights Commission’s report on children in immigration detention, *The Forgotten Children*. The findings of the Commission’s experts were stark and unequivocal: prolonged and mandatory detention of asylum seeker children in the last ten years, under both Labor and Coalition governments, has resulted in “significant mental and physical illness, and developmental delays, in breach of Australia’s international obligations”.

The Coalition government has not responded to the substance of the report. Instead it chose to attack the Commission and wholly reject the report. Prime Minister Tony Abbott described the report as “a transparent stitch-up”, and a “blatantly partisan politicised exercise”, and then suggested, in an eerie echo of Senator Cornyn’s remarks about C.I.A. torture, that instead of condemning the cruel treatment of children, the Commission

“should be writing congratulating letters to the former minister for Immigration and Border Protection”. Meanwhile, Labor’s response was to defend offshore processing and the sending of asylum seekers children in Nauru.

How is it that the two main political parties can continue to defend a policy of mandatory and indefinite detention of asylum seeker children, in the face of overwhelming evidence of the harm that this policy visits upon children?

It seems to me that this instance of the moral turpitude of Australian political culture is based on the fact that a large number of Australians simply do not care what their governments do to asylum seekers, as long as they are prevented from arriving here by boat. In a functioning democracy, we get the government we deserve.

I have never trusted the argument that “stopping the boats”, however cruel the means, whatever the number of children harmed by being detained

and sent to offshore centres, is justified because it “saves lives” by stopping people from drowning at sea. If we truly believe this, we would be creating alternative and safer ways for asylum seekers to come to this country: special visa arrangements in source countries, and higher settlement rates in transit countries, to name just the two more obvious pathways. Both the Coalition and Labor have used the “saving lives” argument as a cynical fig-leaf to cover the shameful truth: they do not want asylum seekers to come here in large numbers, whatever the need, however bad the humanitarian crisis.

Australia’s response should shame us. Its treatment of asylum seeker children demands a reckoning. If those in government who perpetrated these cruelties do not acknowledge the mistakes made, and if Australia allows those responsible to act with impunity, then this country puts itself in danger of losing its soul, just as so many in public office act and speak so as to appear already to have lost theirs. “For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world...?”

Read a full version of this editorial at www.jrs.org.au

I am proud of Australia: Sri Lankan refugee

Sri Lankan refugee and human rights lawyer Ravi, whose name has been changed to protect his identity*

During college days, I used to participate in debates and community activities. I was attracted towards human rights and media activities. After I became a lawyer I joined several trade unions and other leading human rights organisations.

I started engaging with Indian Tamil community workers who are considered the most vulnerable working class people in Sri Lanka. My commitment and work towards uplifting the lives of the vulnerable influenced me to voice my concerns.

I had problems with some persons who seemed to belong to the Sri

Lankan Government. Because of this, I travelled to Australia on a legally valid visa, and was granted a Bridging Visa without any problems.

Still my case is in the preliminary stages, so I am waiting for the results. But I think I have been accepted by the community. I have to say that Australia has wonderful unity, multiculturalism, equality and, most important, the rules of human rights and humanitarian laws.

I am volunteering in a refugee organisation and a community radio station relating to human rights. I am really happy to work with JRS, I am

really proud of their services. Now the hub in Parramatta is very useful for the people marked as refugees.

My message for the Australian Government: when you see the latest ‘Human Development Index 2014’ report published by the United Nations, it says Australia is second in the world. This is a wonderful achievement. To Australia, I am proud of it. According to the report Norway is first.

I say through my message to the Australian Government, try to be first in the Human Development Index.

Finding meaning as a JRS volunteer

Richard Letch

Late last year Richard Letch decided to make a change in his life by giving back to society.

Just months later, he had already made a difference to someone else's life – that of a refugee who was on a bridging visa and needed help filling out a job application.

"It's hard enough for us applying for a job, so for someone who doesn't have English as a first language – well, it was good to help him through that process," says Richard.

As part-owner of a café in Sydney's eastern suburbs, Richard had become jaded by the 'first world problems' that so often

Just months later, he had already made a difference to someone else's life... proliferate in affluent parts of Australia. Keen to bring some balance to his outlook, he started looking around for volunteer opportunities. A friend suggested JRS.

"I didn't know anything about the organisation until I arrived for the volunteer training day and it was at that training that I was given an overview of what the organisation stood for," he says.

"It gave me a window into JRS, and resonated with me in terms of their outreach to refugees and as something to pursue."

Richard spends one day a week volunteering at Arrupe Place, where he serves as a point of contact for asylum seekers who either drop in or have appointments with JRS caseworkers. He sees his job as one in which mutually beneficial relationships are forged.

"[It's about] learning more about refugees and asylum seekers, hopefully making a change in someone's life – a more significant change than [I could make] in my day-to-day work," he says.



Richard Letch outside Arrupe Place



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Arrupe Place opens its doors

JRS' new drop-in centre in Parramatta is buzzing just a month after opening its doors to Western Sydney's refugee community, with 80 asylum seekers attending a recent information session held in conjunction with the Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS).

Partnering with such agencies, the centre aims to fill the glaring need in a region that is home to NSW's largest concentration of refugees and asylum seekers, yet which lacks a relevant suite of services.

Onsite caseworkers at Arrupe Place are providing asylum seekers with a variety of

services including employment support and access to legal referrals.

A large number of volunteers have signed up to fulfil a range of functions such as delivering English classes, running men's and women's groups, a children's playgroup and a food bank, and being on hand as a friendly point of welcome when people drop in to the centre for a cup of tea and a chat.

Arrupe Place is located at Coolock Cottage, 4 Victoria Road, Parramatta. It is financed entirely by donations and relies on the assistance of a dedicated group of volunteers.

*To read more
or donate go to
www.jrs.org.au*

social media

JRS on Twitter

You can follow JRS on Twitter at @JRS_Aus where we will highlight developments around Australian asylum seeker and refugee policy, raise awareness of the plight of refugees seeking asylum in this country, and continue to advocate on behalf of these vulnerable people in the powerful social media sphere.

This is your opportunity to follow us, dialogue with us and share the story of JRS and the people it serves.

donate

How your donation will help

Donations to Arrupe Place will directly fund the following:

- Emergency assistance (medication, travel, rent...)
- Food vouchers
- Casework services
- Home visiting services
- Legal advice
- Social support activities

link online

Would you like to receive Link online?

Sign up for our electronic newsletter at www.jrs.org.au and you'll be helping to conserve both the environment and JRS's precious resources.

Jesuit Refugee Service Australia

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