

World Refugee Day – 20 June 2013

by Tony Pietropiccolo AM
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Thursday is World Refugee Day, a time to raise awareness about the issues affecting refugees and celebrate the positive contributions made by refugees to Australian society.

It seems a contradiction to celebrate refugees when as a nation we are forcing thousands into mandatory detention. However, Australia owes much to the refugees who have made their homes here – people such as Hungarian refugee Frank Lowy, who founded Westfield, the first Sudanese Australian to play in the AFL, Majak Daw, or comedian Anh Do, who arrived on a leaky boat from Vietnam in 1980.

When you see refugees as real people, as future Australian footballers, comedians or businessmen, it is much harder to push them out of sight.

Centrecare has been significantly involved in the resettlement of refugees since 2005, when it was successful in tendering for the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy ('IHSS') range of services. Since then we have welcomed 2,700 people through the program. With the youngest being four months old on arrival and the oldest 82.

We have provided trauma counselling to hundreds of individuals and families who have suffered immense distress in their lives. Some of the stories are too horrific to recount and impossible to comprehend. These stories give us an insight into the dreadful experiences and conditions that refugees are seeking to escape.

Irrespective of how people seeking asylum arrive on our shores we need to treat them with dignity and humanity once they are here.

They are due our respect and our welcome not our resentment.

To do otherwise is to demean ourselves and create a page in our history that we will invariably regret.

We know that long term detention harms people, especially children, yet we continue to do it as if it doesn't matter.

Before the No Advantage test was introduced last year, most asylum seekers who came to Australia by boat were granted refugee status and went on to make Australia their home.

In 2010, more than 80 per cent of people arriving by boat were granted asylum – meaning they are free to live and work in Australia and after two years become Australian citizens. (Source DIAC Systems: Asylum statistics)

What kind of welcome are these future citizens receiving from Australia now?

There are currently 1852 children in closed immigration detention in Australia, a record number.

These are 1852 children who have already suffered tremendous hardship in fleeing to Australia.

Under Australian care these children are continuing their suffering. Their treatment has been criticised by the Australian Human Rights Commission and refugee advocate groups.

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Last month, the Australian Human Rights Commission urged the Federal Government not to detain asylum seeker families at high security immigration detention facilities and, where they are granted bridging visas to live in the community, to provide them with work rights and adequate support. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia is obligated not to hold children in immigration detention facilities unless it is a measure of last resort. (Source: Australian Human Rights Commission statement Wednesday 8 May 2013)

The detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru do not feature in regular reports released by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship but we know there were 30 children on Manus Island in April where the harsh conditions under which refugees live have been criticised by UNHCR Australia.

Detention has been shown to damage the physical and psychological well-being of asylum seekers. With lengthy delays in the processing of their claims, little or no information on when they are likely to be released and the anxiety associated with a possible return to the traumatic life they escaped, detention leads to mounting stress and tension, which often results in depressive illness and thoughts of despair and helplessness, self-harm, rioting, burning of facilities and hunger strikes.

The impact of detention on children is no less. Prior to all children being released from mainland immigration detention centres in 2005, there was evidence of psychological disturbance among children in detention, including mutism, withdrawing from contact with others, bedwetting and refusal to eat and drink, as well as acts of self-harm and suicide attempts.

What will these children held in detention for years feel about their new home when they are almost inevitably granted asylum?

Will they be willing and able to contribute to Australian society like Frank Lowy, Majak Daw and Anh Do? Or will they be left wondering whether Australia is a compassionate country when it warehouses vulnerable people, including children like them, behind bars?

Trying to minimise the influx of refugees into Australia does not justify cruelty to the children who have already come. The detention of innocent children is always unjust and offends our common humanity.

By following this path we are allowing a tragedy to occur that will in years to come cause us to make another national apology – just as we did for the children of the stolen generations, the child migration scheme and the children of forced adoptions.