

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)

54 Beaconsfield Pde, Albert Park 3206
Ph: 96962107; bssc@cyberspace.net.au



*I was a stranger and you made
me welcome ...*

Newsletter 73 March 2015

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for asylum seekers
- * actively network with like-minded individuals and groups who are working for justice for asylum seekers
- * promote advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers
- * raise awareness of asylum seeker issues and concerns through a range of activities

When does silence become complicity?

Silence never won rights. They are not handed down from above; they are forced by pressures from below. ~Roger Baldwin

When does silence become an evil in itself? This is an interesting moral question because so much of the time many of us think: I haven't got time... I don't know enough .. And yet I want to let those making decisions know that I absolutely don't agree with them. And in a democracy I have a right to be heard—and then the rub: I have a responsibility to speak in whatever way I can.

We will never be able to claim that in Australia we did not know what was happening to asylum seekers. This is because, in spite of the veil of secrecy established by the government, there is a lot of evidence that asylum seekers, particularly those in detention, are treated in degrading and abusive ways. And that all this is in flagrant contravention of Australia's human rights obligations.

All the major church groups have expressed strong opposition to the government policies of mandatory detention, the use of off-shore detention centres, the detention of children, lack of family reunion and the general harshness of the current treatment of people seeking protection. In May last year the Catholic Bishops of Australia named what was happening as 'institutionalised cruelty' and called on Australians to renoun

ce these policies and 'say no to the dark forces which make these policies possible.'

In 2015, we will make a concerted effort to get more publicity about what is happening to these very vulnerable people and to get a more concerted voice asking for change. It seems that such a push for change must come from ordinary folk like us. We cannot afford to be silent, lest we be judged to be



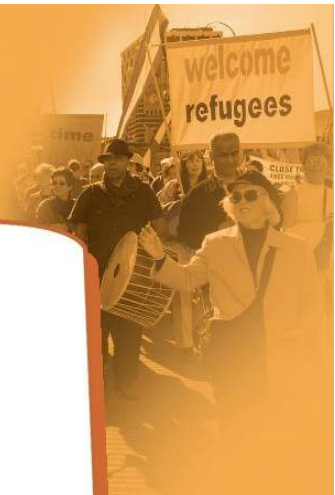
WALK

JUSTICE

2015

for

REFUGEES



Seeking asylum is a human right—close Manus, close Nauru

March is on Palm Sunday

2pm March 29th State Library (corner Swanston & La Trobe Streets Melbourne)

We urge everyone who can to walk in solidarity on this day. Bring banners, placards and anything you can to draw attention to the issue of justice and compassion for asylum seekers and refugees. Bring friends. Last year about 10,000 people walked. Let's make it even more this year.

BASP will have a banner—all welcome to walk with us.

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project

Discussion Night 1 2015

Thursday March 19th 2015

Changing the discourse about people seeking protection in Australia

A discussion with Dana Affleck and others

Dana is a young person, studying law and a very active advocate for asylum seekers. She has established A Road to Refuge which is an interactive web site and a way of engaging people in thinking about refugee issues.

Time: 7.30 – 9.30p.m

The evening will also include an update on BASP

Many aspects of policy and direction that affect asylum seekers keep changing. The stories of individual situations and people are both challenging and enlightening. Some sharing of our experiences at BASP can help shape advocacy and community awareness.



Contact: 03 96962107

The forgotten children or the forgotten report?



How to have a forgotten report? Just put all the publicity into denigrating the Head of the statutory body commissioned to do the report. And so we have heard almost nothing about the contents of the report into children being in mandatory immigration detention because of the vitriolic attack on Professor Gillian Triggs. We need to be concerned not just about children in detention but the strength of our democracy and the place of law in that democracy if this sort of thing can happen. If a personal vendetta is able to totally distract

the public from a consideration of the issues at stake here it does not bode well for our advocacy for all asylum seekers.

In this well-researched and comprehensive document the Human Rights Commission have detailed all aspects of mandatory detention and children. It does not make pretty reading. On 18/2/2015 there were 252 children in immigration detention, with 116 on Nauru and 136 in Australian detention centres, according to figures supplied by the office of Immigration Minister Peter Dutton. Over the 10 years covered by the report, there were times when there were over 2000 children in detention.

The findings of The Forgotten Children report should shame us all. Triggs found that children have been sexually and physically assaulted in federal care. Some children have been detained for more than 27 months. Many are denied education. Unaccompanied children are locked up in adult compounds. They are mentally and emotionally traumatised. There have been multiple instances of attempted suicide and self-harm. A few paragraphs from the report indicate something of its findings:

The mandatory and prolonged immigration detention of children is in clear violation of international human rights law.

At the time of writing this report, adults and children have been in detention for over one year and two months on average, over 413 days. Children who arrived on, or after 19 July 2013, are to be transferred to Nauru. This transfer can happen at any time. Children are detained on Nauru and there is no timeframe for their release.

Prolonged detention is having profoundly negative impacts on the mental and emotional health and development of children. In the first half of 2014, 34 percent of children in detention were assessed as having mental health disorders at levels of seriousness that were comparable with children receiving outpatient mental health services in Australia. Less than two percent of children in the Australian population were receiving outpatient mental health services in 2014.

Children are exposed to danger by their close confinement with adults who suffer high levels of mental illness. Thirty percent of adults detained with children have moderate to severe mental illnesses.



Professor Triggs, the President of the Human rights Commission and George Brandis, Attorney General

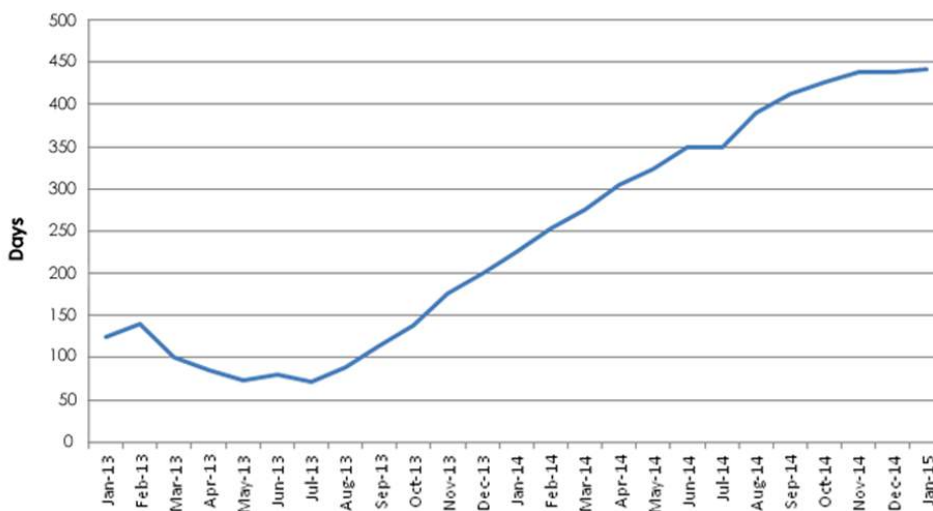
The numerous reported incidents of assaults, sexual assaults and self-harm involving children indicate the danger of the detention environment.

Despite the best efforts of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection and its contractors to provide services and support to children in detention, it is the fact of detention itself that is causing harm. In particular the deprivation of liberty and the exposure to high numbers of mentally unwell adults are causing emotional and developmental disorders amongst children.

It did not include first hand research into the fate of children on Nauru because the Commission did not have the power to conduct first hand research outside Australia.

A separate report by former Integrity Commissioner Philip Moss into attacks on inmates — including five minors — at the Nauru Centre has been completed but it appears unlikely it will be released – at least not in its entirety.

Average time in detention (all onshore detainees)



The government has complained (as part of its complaints about the Human Rights Commission) that the report should not have been held on its watch because numbers of children in detention are decreasing. However the graph opposite shows how the length of time has increased markedly over the past eighteen months. As well the report criticises both major parties for their part in the cruel treatment of children.

A wonderful new beginning

Asra is this beautiful little 5 year old—a Prep! Until recently she with her family (Mum, Dad, and baby Simon) were in Immigration Detention. They are now in a house in the northern suburbs after spending some weeks in temporary accommodation with many other families.

The joy of being able to have a place of their own, get their little girl ready for school—like all other families—is amazing. In spite of the ongoing lack of security about the future, this little family can now begin some form of normalcy.

Just last year we spent a day together at the Collingwood Children’s farm and Asra fell in love with Daria, the goat. As we left the farm that day Asra was sad she was not going to see Daria again. It would be good to meet up again and have another hug!



This family is already helping others in the same situation as they are to take steps to find houses and get settled too. These are the people we need to make strong Australian communities.



Holidays in the country



The Sahamsullah family (photo from the Myrtleford Times)

Over the holidays, two families of Hasara background spent time in Myrtleford. They stayed with families in the idyllic north-eastern Victoria and both were delighted with the friendship offered and the beauty of the countryside. Both were visiting country Australia for the first time.



A couple enjoying the Ovens River

We were able to arrange these short holidays because of a visit by Brigid to Myrtleford last year to speak at a Women's Wellness Network breakfast. The local women then met and decided that they could extend hospitality to a family and show them around their area.

Elizabeth Walpole (one of the organisers) said "Having come from the northern part of Afghanistan where it is quite mountainous, they were excited to visit one of our mountains so they really enjoyed Mt Buffalo.

The kids played plenty of sport including cricket and soccer and table tennis and said it was great to be in Australia where they can play sport. A local resident was quoted as saying 'I'm proud to be a Myrtleford resident for what the group has done in welcoming this family'

They all had a lovely time here and have been in contact with us to thank us and to say how enjoyable it was for them."

For the second year in a row, one family was hosted for Christmas by folk in Heywood and another in Echuca.



Elizabeth Walpole and Cathy McGowan, local MP, with Brigid at Myrtleford

No need for such punitive measures

Java (not his real name) is a young eighteen year old Tamil man. He was an unaccompanied minor, spent time in detention and was released into community detention. He went to school, was delighted with this opportunity and was obviously well liked by the staff at the school. He then committed a couple of very small transgressions and was re-detained. He was given a good behaviour bond of six months by the Court. That was many months ago, long after the six months, and not only is he still in detention but he has been transferred to another quite remote detention centre.

His teachers had been taking in work for him to do and guiding his study. All of that is now impossible and again, there is the total uncertainty of what next. How long will he be detained and is he to be punished far beyond any other young person in the community for his transgression?

In the meantime the support that Java had is not possible because he has been sent so far away.



A man's love for his son.

Chandra (name changed) must have waited around watching the visitors area for many, many weeks before he saw me coming in. He is a very shy man and rarely comes to the visitor's place.



I had bought small remote controlled helicopters for a number of children when they were out on an excursion. Chandra had obviously witnessed this and had probably seen the fun the kids had with these small toys. He has a small son in Sri Lanka whom he hadn't seen since the child was a baby over five years ago. He wanted to give him something for his birthday. He hit upon one of the toy helicopters, and he negotiated with the authorities at the detention centre to use his points (accumulated for participation in activities) to send this toy to his small boy. But he had to get the helicopter. He eventually saw me come in and the interaction should have been videoed as I tried to work out just what he wanted me to buy. I had no idea whether what he wanted was an elephant or a TV or a house! We struggled for a long time but he would not give up. I would have just said "You stupid woman. Can't you get what I am saying?" He obviously didn't want any of those who spoke his language to be part of the conversation. Eventually we got there. It was one of the small toys.

Unfortunately this was just before Christmas and with shame I admit I forgot my promise. When I returned to the detention centre in late January poor Chandra must have felt he had to start all over again as I struggled to remember what I was supposed to buy. But the penny once again dropped! The helicopter was duly delivered in time to be sent for a birthday that was at the end of February. I hope.

I marvelled at this man's love for a small boy he has not seen for so long.

- Brigid

Australia's appalling stance towards Sri Lankan war crimes

It is often claimed that asylum seeker policies are legal—even though in many cases they offend our international obligations. Some of the responsibilities we as a nation have accepted when various conventions and agreements were signed, were not translated into domestic law and therefore technically we can transgress them. We have also made new laws that allow human abuses to go unchallenged.

However, an act can be legal but not right. Apartheid was legal. Slavery was legal. And so is our treatment of our fellow human beings who are seeking our protection.

Many people from Sri Lanka (mainly Tamils) have been summarily sent back to Sri Lanka with very little attention paid to determining their refugee status. Since November of last year it is legal to stop would be asylum seekers on the sea and after asking them a few questions, turn them around and return them to their country. This has been done. Because the December change of law, there is no way to challenge these actions. The new provisions of the Migration Bill passed then made them legal but nothing can make them right.

In the civil war in Sri Lanka, which ended in 2009, war atrocities were conducted. Till now the Sri Lankan government has refused to accept its responsibility to acknowledge this or indeed to cease reprisals towards many citizens. Australia's short-term, one-eyed interest in stopping boats, and its perceived need to keep Sri Lanka close in order to do that, has led to these outrageous results where we don't support accountability for war crimes in our region. A documentary you may decide to see and discuss is No Fire Zone. It is not easy watching—but life for may asylum seekers from Sri Lanka is not easy either.



Some time to relax



The Mordialloc Aspendale Catholic Parish hosted a picnic for families who have been recently released from immigration detention. Libby Saunders, BASP Volunteer Coordinator, organised families to attend. John Meyer borrowed a bus (courtesy of Simonds College) and drove many to the event.



It was a great day. The food was very appetizing with salads and bbq and sweets provided by the parish people.

Thanks to all who assisted. These opportunities are priceless because the good will engendered spreads community understanding. We believe this is our way forward.



Supporting Families through the teaching of English

This BASP program coordinated by Sue Wood and Phil Steele is a huge success. Over thirty families are being supported and another group of volunteers have been recruited so more families can be assisted. As well, Anne Leyland has set up a wonderful set of resources for the volunteer tutors.



Many families are very isolated when they are finally released from detention.

They sometimes live in an area where there are other people from their home country but often they don't actually know anyone in their local area. It is amazing to see the bonds they have often forged with other families they have been with in detention. Sometimes they will travel for hours via public transport to meet up with each other—from one side of Melbourne to the other.

A training session at Albert Park for volunteers



Jacquie, English tutor volunteer with the family she visits

As well though, most long for some interaction with Aussie folk—as a sign that they are accepted in their new country—and as well because they can often get the sort of information about how things work here that is difficult to glean from other sources.

Thanks to volunteers and to the Coordinators of this program.

How free is life on Nauru after gaining refugee status?

Around 400 people on Nauru have been released from the Australian-run detention centre to live in the community after being given refugee visas by the Nauruan government. Some of these are families and some are young people including a number of unaccompanied minors. Most who have any contact with people here in Australia attest to the violence and general misery of life on Nauru, even outside the detention centre. Jobs are hard to get and if any do get work this is resented by the local Nauruans. There is seemingly no long term future for any refugee on Nauru but any alternatives are missing at this stage.

Many of these refugees have staged demonstrations in recent days to protest against conditions on Nauru and their treatment at the hands of locals.

In a move that will seriously increase tensions on Nauru, Nauruan police have arbitrarily arrested about 150 of these refugees. A notice was distributed by Nauruan police warning the refugees that there would be penalties of up to three years jail for taking part in protests. Police also told refugees that they will only be allowed to protest inside their compounds. Many of these people were fleeing to Australia to escape just this sort of treatment.

In fact to date these have been peaceful protests but there is documentation to show Nauruan police attacking the refugees.

Ian Rintoul, an advocate speaking for the Refugee Action Collective in Sydney said “As more and more refugees are released into the community on Nauru, the political and social problems for the Nauruan government will grow. The refugees being warehoused for the Australian government are being denied resettlement and are essentially confined to Nauru against their will, as a permanently deprived underclass, with no future.”

Deportation is ugly

Of course, as a Project that exists to try and assist asylum seekers, those of us who work for and support BASP are always distressed when those seeking protection have their applications rejected and are deported from Australia. We recognise that the final decision for some will be negative. However for most who are finally sent back to their home country there are humanitarian reasons why this seems unnecessarily harsh. While people may not satisfy the criteria for a refugee status under the convention, many have compelling reasons for not being returned home.

As well, the time taken to make determinations, particularly if the asylum seekers are in detention, has made them dependent, and all too often, mentally ill. So they actually are in a worse situation when they return than when they left. All too often they have nowhere to go, have sold all their assets to come and are desperate in terms of the future. In the light of all this, people need time to come to grips with their situation and be helped to put things in place that make their life after return as safe and reasonable as possible.

So it seems to us that the process for deporting people needs to be more humane than it is. No-one will want to leave. After all they have lost what often seems to them their only chance to have a secure, safe and happy life. So they need as much time and support as can be given—both by the Department of Immigration and supporters in the community. In our experience this does not always happen. We have been saddened when we have not been able to soften the trauma a bit.



Good News



Just before Christmas three small boys did some busking, singing Christmas carols and the money they made they donated to helping asylum seekers. BASP used their donation to help with some toys for the children in detention.

Again this year BASP rallied some great people to assist and provided a wonderful Christmas Lunch to the people still in MITA - Melbourne Immigration Transitional Accommodation - the detention centre in Broadmeadows. The huge amount of food - Ethiopian, Iranian, Indian - was enjoyed by over 200 people on the day, in a whirlwind operation which commenced at noon and had to be completed and tidied by 2pm in readiness for visitors.



The lead up to Christmas was hectic but again showed the great generosity of so many people in the community.

The donations of food and other items expand pre Christmas and Catherine, supported by Noelle and Jacky, pictured, packaged these into wonderful hampers which were distributed, by volunteer drivers, to families in the community, living on very basic income support.

Noelle, Catherine and Jacky with hampers

Family reunion

Family reunion has been made almost impossible because of the introduction of Temporary Protection Visas in December last year. It is very moving always to see families reunite.

Around Christmas a mother from Chad who has been here for about two years having come to join her eldest son with her three other sons, was reunited with four of her daughters. Catherine has worked tirelessly for years to achieve this end and the happiness of all in the family was a great reward.

Crisis Accommodation houses

With some of the funds raised by Robert Allanadale and friends, BASP secured a 4 bedroom house in Kings Park 2 days before Christmas and had it furnished and ready to go by early new year, thanks to the efforts of John Meyer, our very regular furniture deliverer and his 2 assistants-on this occasion, Ayman and Javad.

A family of mother (8 months pregnant), father, 5yo and grandmother moved from the one room they had been provided on release from MITA to this house on January 5, with the 5yo marvelling that they had more than one room to live in. Other family members, also released from detention have joined them and they are able to live comfortably while they discover life outside of detention.

By late February we also had a second house ready for a family- initially a mother with 4 young children.

The other to reunite was an Afghani family, in which the husband/ father arrived in Australia over five years ago and his wife and 4 children finally arrived on Dec 27th. With the help of those who donate to BASP, we were able to significantly contribute to the costs involved. The applications fees, visas and fares are beyond the reach of most asylum seekers here.



Ayman and John Meyer, our regular delivery team

John, a volunteer, works with Ayman who is from Somalia to take furniture and all sorts of things that are needed to families and other asylum seekers. It is a wonderful contribution to make.



Many of us know Elnaz (and Caterina and Mark O’Loughlin) so this story courtesy of AMES is wonderful.

Elnaz Tavancheh, an ethnic Hazara who fled her home in Iran to avoid persecution and threats, completed her VCE at the school this year and is hoping to study at university.

After fleeing to Indonesia from Iran and taking a dangerous boat journey to Christmas Island, she and her mother are now living in Melbourne’s northern suburbs.

She gained a place at Parade College through connections she made while in asylum detention and says the experience has been “fun and exciting”. This made her the only girl in an all-boys school.

“I was scared on the very first day – everyone was much taller than me. But all of the boys were very welcoming and very respectful. The teachers and the principal were great and I really enjoyed being part of the school,” Elnaz said.

She said the school was a little worried at first and told her they could not be sure how the boys would react to her. “For the first week it was bit uncomfortable with everyone looking at me. I was a little afraid,” Elnaz said. “But I wore the school uniform to try to blend in and after a little while the boys all accepted me as a fellow student and a friend,” she said.

Elnaz’ path to Parade College began while she was still inside the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation centre in Broadmeadows. “There was a lady called Caterina who came to visit asylum seekers who I got to know. When I got my bridging visa and was released, she invited me to work as a volunteer at her kinder.

“I was asked to speak to a group of Christian Brothers about my experiences. There I met Mark O’Loughlin, one of the brothers and a scientist at Melbourne Museum. “Mark has been very good to me. He invited me to work with him at the museum in the marine biology lab. He gave me a microscope to work with and he even named a new species of sea cucumber he discovered after me: *Globosita Elnazae*. Parade College is supported by the Christian Brothers and Mr

O’Loughlin made arrangements for Elnaz to attend the school.

In December, she completed her VCE, studying Physics, Chemistry, Maths Methods, Biology, English and Persian.

As an asylum seeker on a bridging visa, Elnaz does not have rights to publicly funded education and she cannot afford the \$40,000 fee for a science degree at Melbourne University.

She’s hoping to get a scholarship to do nursing or agricultural science next year.

“The main thing for myself and my mother is that we are safe now – and we are grateful for that,” Elnaz said.

“But I hope I can continue to study. I don’t want to sit at home. And I hope that I can stay in Australia and have a future and a career,” Elnaz said.

“I would dearly love to give something back to the country that has given my mother and myself safety and a refuge from everything we feared back home,” Elnaz said.

- Thanks to Laurie Nowell

Thanks to Liz Gallois

Liz Gallois is a friend of BASP and late last year she held an art exhibition and sold art pieces for our Project. It was a beautiful day and Liz had completely transformed her house into a gallery with art of her own and some pieces donated by friends.

We are very grateful for the money raised for the Project

and for the support of all involved.

And we have two small pieces of art from the exhibition Liz gave us for our BASP office.



How you can help ...

Donations

Donations can be made by cheque to Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project, 52 Beaconsfield Pde, Albert Park or directly to **Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603**

Advocacy

Write to your local member of Parliament (or call in and see them) and ask for a more humane approach to asylum seekers

Food that is very welcome

Eggs, rice, salt, two minute noodles, cooking oil, tea and coffee, long life milk, tuna, canned tomatoes, canned fruit, chick peas, canned beans (not tinned soup)



Other goods always in demand

Cleaning materials and dishwashing detergents, toilet paper and washing powder.

Something Special

A voucher for Coles, Big W, Kmart or similar stores allows asylum seekers the independence to buy something they really want and need.

Things we can't take

We can't manage clothing. We have limited capacity to store furniture or large items or other household goods.

THANK YOU



Christmas 2014 has come and gone—and still no BASP newsletter!

We had a huge amount of support around Christmas. We were able to package and deliver a large number of hampers and have a MITA Christmas party as well as a lovely thank you party at Albert Park for volunteers. However for the many we did not see or thank personally, we want you to know that your support enables us to help many asylum seekers and new refugees.

We thank those who help week in, week out, and provide the practical assistance to many. We also thank those who donate money that enables the Project to continue. And we are grateful to those who send messages of good will and encouragement. We know that there is a real level of support for all those desperate enough to go through the travails of leaving home and enduring the harsh realities to make a new future. Australia is certainly able to be more hospitable than we currently are and we will continue to do our small bit to ensure this.

Best wishes for 2015.



Brigid Arthur



Catherine Kelly