

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 89 August 2018

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for people seeking asylum
- * 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

What price do we put on compassion?

The Minister for Home Affairs, Peter Dutton, recently warned the public that one act of compassion could ‘undo overnight’ the five years of hard work in stopping boats coming to Australia with asylum seekers on board. We find both this statement and the underlying implications immensely sad.

Many times over the past year or so Minister Dutton has tried to stop people being brought to Australia from off-shore detention centres to get crucial medical care. A 10-year-old refugee boy who has made repeated attempts to kill himself while held on Nauru was not given permission to come to Australia until the court ordered the transfer for acute psychological care, with a judge saying the boy would be at imminent risk of dying if left in the regional processing centre. Doctors begged the Australian Border Force to move a 63 year-old terminally ill man with lung cancer away from the “dangerously inadequate” conditions on Nauru. And a 70 year-old man with a heart condition who had been waiting 20 days for a doctor’s appointment? In fact, there have been at least ten such occasions when Border Force continued to give negative decisions until the Courts ordered a reversal, and people from off-shore detention have been brought to Australia for urgent medical treatment.

We have to ask ‘what is the reality of what would be undone’ if these decisions about people’s welfare had been made expeditiously and caringly rather than under coercion of the Minister?

The argument Mr Dutton makes is that without the deterrence of harsh measures the boats will start coming again. The logic seems to be that suffering and even death are the necessary price to pay for stopping boats.

One hundred people who have in the past been brought to Australia from the two off-shore detention places – including families, pregnant women and elderly people – have lost their homes and income support and told they have to get work to survive. Another three hundred or so are being threatened with the same ultimatum. This is tantamount to forcing many of them into destitution because, having never worked in Australia, and with a lot of trauma related health issues, it is not easy to get employment that enables a family or individual to survive.



Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

Statement from Behrouz Boochani (refugee writer on Manus Island) read at rallies on the fifth anniversary of Manus Island and Nauru being reopened in 2013

I'm talking with you from Manus Island after five years of living in harsh conditions and too much suffering. I would like to thank you for standing for humanity today. It's truly extraordinary and so valuable to see many people here who care about your human family and our shared moral values.



For years we have spoken to you about our experiences here in Manus Island. And now, in 2018, the cruel policy of 19 July 2013 is still damaging people. We have had many dark and difficult days, especially those days when we have lost our friends. So 19 July does not just commemorate the introduction of a policy. It is also a day of remembering those whose lives have been lost, those young men who were just seeking freedom, and instead found the cruelty and violence of the Australian state. And those of us who remain continue to experience this suffering, wondering if we will ever be free to make our lives somewhere in peace and security, and free to see our families again.

But the government wants us to forget all this humanity, and instead believe their propaganda. Their 19 July policy is in fact a rejection of humanity and the compassion and understanding that exists between us. They want to replace human values with violence, immorality and humiliation. They are exploiting innocent people and damaging Australia's national character for their own political aims.

But we know that people like you won't let them. Today you are saying that this unlawfulness is enough, this violence is enough, this loss of life, of hope, of kindness and compassion is enough.

Each of you is a hero in this dark historical period. Your children and grandchildren should be proud of you, either now or in the future, for standing up for what's right, both for us here in Manus and Nauru, and for a better, kinder, more compassionate Australia.

As you know, many innocent people on Manus and Nauru are still suffering. Too many Australians are still indifferent to this, or too unsure of what to do. But you make us stronger. We watch you raise your voices in the Australian streets and feel your presence here with us.

Our hope is with you. To raise your voices beyond these streets, to keep the campaign growing especially as Australia heads into an important election. To talk to your politicians and neighbours, and encourage them to act for kindness and compassion - if not for us, then for an Australia they can be proud of.

We must continue putting the government under pressure until the day when they officially announce the end to this cruel offshore processing policy.

Being homeless and an asylum seeker

We may have had a stereotype in our minds about homeless people. Among all the reasons why someone may become homeless is being a person seeking asylum and with no support.

We have had calls or visits from individuals who are actually homeless. This is very confronting but we try to do the best we can. On one such occasion recently, a kind couple who have decided to offer a room for short term crisis housing came to the rescue of a young man who had been forced to live outside.

This was the second time they had done this. The first smile from this man was when he had had something to eat and was told he had a room for a couple of weeks while we sorted out some solution for him (hopefully work).



Another wonderful woman who housed two new arrivals said "the experience of interacting with them, as one human being to another, has been most worthwhile."

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project

Discussion 3 2018

Monday 27th August, 2018

Film: Chauka, please tell us the time

Berouz Bouchani

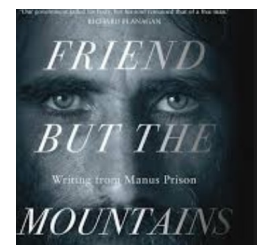
Directors:

**Behrouz Boochani and Arash Kamali
Sarvestani**

Introduced by Janet Galbraith

**Behrouz has just published a book “No Friend but the Mountains” and
Janet will talk about this too.**

And we will have an update on the activities of BASP.



Time: 1.30—3.30 pm

Venue:

**Brigidine Ministry Centre
54 Beaconsfield Pde
Albert Park**



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

Do we learn anything from reflecting on this tragedy?



In the first weeks of August, 2018, at a coronial hearing in Perth, the story of a tragedy unfolded. (The report is not yet available—probably will not be for months). It is a story of particular significance in the light it throws on a sad era in Australia.

Fazel Chegeni Nejad initially arrived on Christmas Island by boat from Indonesia as an asylum seeker on October 23, 2011. As a Faili Kurd, he was found by authorities to be a stateless man. In spite of this, he spent a total of 1,477 days in immigration detention. On December 22, 2011, he was involved in an incident at the Curtin Detention centre in Western Australia, with four other men. He was sentenced to six months and one day in jail, later suspended on appeal. This sentence meant he failed the character test under immigration laws and was unlikely to be ever granted asylum in Australia.

However, as a stateless man, he could not be sent back to Iran, so technically he could be held in detention forever. Fazel was shunted around many different detention centres and eventually ended up on Christmas Island and he died alone in the jungle having scaled two fences to escape.



Fazel had clearly needed expert medical treatment for much of the time he was detained.

Those of us who know how immigration detention works know how little real medical assistance is given— either for mental or physical health needs. Fazel had neither. The negative impact of long-term detention on people combined with a lack of health services was already very well known.

Several of us associated with BASP knew Fazel and also two of the other men who were charged as a result of the altercation in the dining area of the Curtin Detention Centre—a disturbance that lasted less than a minute. Fazel had unfortunately pleaded guilty to this charge and that meant his visa was cancelled and he was re-detained after he had gained his freedom for a few short months in 2015.

What does this say to us? It confirms that mandatory detention is the root of most of the discrimination being practised towards people seeking asylum in Australia when they attempt entry by boat. The logic of the policy seems to have been taken to mean that if Australia has deemed it is morally right to deprive people arbitrarily of their liberty, it is also justifiable to do anything else to these same people. The sad story of Fazel demonstrates the cruelty and the destructive power of mandatory detention.

The legitimacy of ‘off-shore’ processing follows from an acceptance of mandatory detention. There are no boundaries to where people can be detained, for how long or how someone can appeal its legality. **No decent country implements mandatory detention or off-shore detention in the way Australia does. We must stop both.**

Fazel had been tortured in his own country. So prolonged detention, the unfair decisions made by Australian authorities (such as the excessive sentence imposed on him by a Magistrate that was later overturned by the Supreme Court), and being incarcerated in remote detention centres, all proved too much for a sensitive and broken man. The logic of ‘deterrence’ and security measures and efficiency may make sense to all the layers of bureaucracy involved in this terrible system but at risk are the lives of men like Fazel.



While in detention, Fazel used to spend countless hours folding paper cranes for the happiness of others, which his visitors would then take to people in hospital, aged and hospice care on his behalf.

Celebrations

On June 19, as part of Refugee Week and with the support of the City of Port Phillip, BASP hosted a lunch for supporters and interested members of the community. The meal was prepared by a number of asylum seekers with whom BASP has worked. The council donation covered their ingredients. We were treated to some wonderful tastes- dumplings from Tibet and curries and other dishes from Ethiopia, Malaysia and Pakistan. The cooks were delighted to have their foods tried and appreciated. They were also pleased to be on the 'giving' side, rather than the 'receiving' side.



Several of the Port Phillip Council members including the Mayor graciously attended. We gave an update on the work of BASP and in particular highlighted the impending changes to income support for many asylum seekers. This is outlined below. The really exciting thing that happened was the response of the Port Phillip Council (in the following article). We think local government support to more humane policies is crucial so this was very heartening.

In August, the Department of Home Affairs announced that the income support of up to 7000 asylum seekers living in the community while waiting for a decision on their claim for protection would be cut. This SRSS (Status Resolution Support Services) payment provides a living allowance (89% of Newstart which is \$247 a week) with some access to help with housing and to torture and trauma counselling.

A spokesman for the Department said the SRSS 'was not a social welfare programme', but was designed to provide short-term support. This mirrors the intent of Newstart. Without wanting to justify that Newstart is fair to those Australians looking for work (because it manifestly isn't), we want to say that people who have made an application for protection and have not been previously allowed to work, cannot automatically just get a job because they have been given work rights. It means that people have to find accommodation, find a job if possible and survive without money in the meantime.

Usually groups like BASP are the only safety net. So any support towards accommodation and/or work means we can help keep people out of destitution.

Port Phillip Council calls for reversal of asylum seeker income support cuts

Published 22 June 2018

Port Phillip Council has marked Refugee Week by joining a national campaign calling on the Federal Government to reverse income support cuts to thousands of asylum seekers.

Councillor Ogy Simic, who successfully moved the notice of motion at this week's Council meeting, said it was Council's duty to try and stop vulnerable and often traumatised arrivals to Australia from joining the growing ranks of people experiencing homelessness.

"Refugee Week is a timely opportunity for us as a Council to say 'enough is enough' and join with other councils and organisations to advocate on this important issue for asylum seekers," Cr Simic, who came to Australia as a refugee, said.

"Our City is a proud to be a Refugee Welcome Zone and we want to make it very clear that we believe this unfair

policy must be overturned before more asylum seekers become hungry and homeless as they wait for their protection applications to stay in Australia to be assessed.”

Cr Simic said the local Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project, which supports people who have been detained in Immigration Detention Centres and asylum seekers living in the community, was concerned about the number of people already seeking help after being dropped from the federal Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program.

“These desperate people include a mother of four who had been deemed ‘job ready’ despite three of her children being too young to attend school,” he said.

Mayor Bernadene Voss said Council would take actions including:

asking the Prime Minister and Federal Minister of Home Affairs to reverse cuts to the SSRS program and informing local Victorian and federal MPs of Council’s position along with agencies and community groups assisting asylum seekers.

Background

The Federal Government’s national SSRS program provides a basic living allowance worth about \$247 a week, usually 89 per cent of the Newstart Allowance, casework support and access to torture and trauma counselling. It is delivered by not-for-profit agencies.

In August 2017, the Home Affairs Department reduced those able to access the program, including people studying English for employment. As a result of a further eligibility change on 1 May 2018, SRSS asylum seeking recipients who are assessed as being job ready will start exiting the program. The Federal Government maintains the program is designed for short-term, tailored support and that asylum seekers who have work rights and are considered ‘job ready’, should be obliged to work.

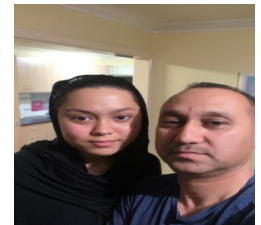


BASP had a recent call from the Food Technology Teacher/ Inspire Club Coordinator at Albert Park Secondary College about providing cooked/frozen food for people seeking asylum and in need

of food. The students were willing to cook whatever we considered would be suitable. We agreed to try vegetarian and meat pasta dinners for 1 to begin. 20 dinners were prepared, with the ingredients on the front as well as smiley faces. What a wonderful initiative and awareness raising activity for the students as well as a much appreciated meal for many in need.

A proud father and his daughter

Batool was given a scholarship by the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary to study Bio-medical Science in 2018 at Deakin University. She has done extremely well in the first semester, gaining a first class distinction and a distinction. Her father, Sabir, is justifiably very proud. Her mother and brothers are still in Pakistan .



A lovely win-win story from another of our amazing volunteers to Phil Steele who co-ordinates the English program:

“Hello Phil, I’ve just had a phone call from a very excited Tineseri telling me that she passed the citizenship test yesterday. She is very thankful that she’s had help preparing I had no doubt she would be successful. A big thank you to you for pairing me up with her...she’s a delightful person, whose confidence has surged. Jacinta”

Thanks to Jacinta for her part in this outcome.



Need for work and work experience

BASP met with members of the Montmorency Asylum Seekers Support Group (MASSG) in June. As well as their advocacy role, this group was keen to assist people seeking asylum in practical ways including providing work for those with work rights. BASP was able to link a man seeking maintenance and gardening work. This is part of the feedback

“Hi Libby,

Just to let you know we had a very happy 7 hours with Tofigh today. He's indeed a gentle guy, despite the huge sadness he carries with his wife and son still in Iran. From the employment point of view, he's also a very helpful and energetic assistant in most things—home maintenance and gardening! He wanted to work immediately and clearly as much as possible, and he worked with us on the full range of property management stuff here - gutters, gravelling drive patches, and then a wonderful long effort with me in my veggie gardens which haven't looked so happy for a long time. ..We'd be very happy to give him a reference immediately. And importantly, more work. Lyn”

BASP has been working with other organisations to expand work opportunities for people able to work. One example is pooling potential candidates for working in rural industries in a forthcoming Information session. Also, we will share work opportunities with each other if one of us does not have the right candidate for that opportunity at that time.

All agencies are concerned at the increasing need for and interconnectedness of housing and work.

Marian, our employment volunteer, continues to help individuals with resumes and links to work as well as building up contacts with potential employers.

ANY leads to work or work experience are welcome. Please call Libby on 88422691

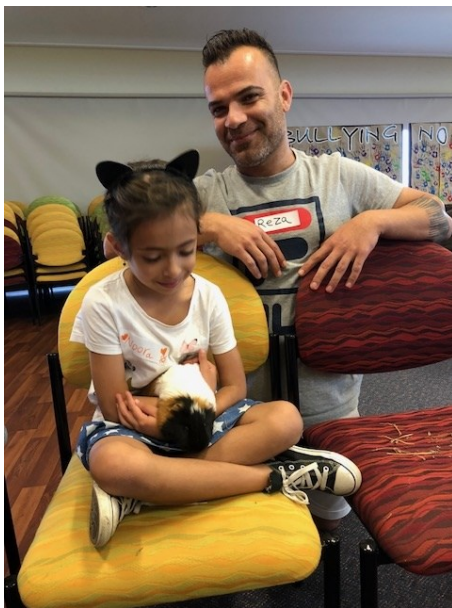
A success story ...

One of the Commonwealth Games athletes seeking asylum came to BASP after 6 weeks of living rough. We helped with accommodation, wrote his resume and within the week Jon secured a construction job. The only problem was that the work site was totally inaccessible by public transport... thankfully with help from a friend he managed to get there at 6.45am on a cold and windy Melbourne winter's day....and started his first job in Australia ... and he hasn't looked back and that was 4 weeks ago.

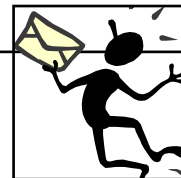
Nadjoua Youssouf is a Year 11 student at Mooroolbark College. She is one of the daughters of Fatima, the very brave woman from Chad who has managed to bring eight of her nine children to Australia with a lot of assistance from BASP and others in the communities of Essendon and Mooroolbark. She recently got a scholarship to attend a Young Leaders Program at Trinity College. She wrote a thank-you letter to BASP for supporting her application.

We had great lectures and we got to talk to students from Melbourne University who are doing streams that we are interested in. As my aim is to become a doctor, this program motivated me to study harder to get the ATAR needed to the University of Melbourne.

That would be a wonderful next chapter in the story of a family who have been through more than most of us can imagine.



A wonderful couple of days at Echuca. Host families welcomed families and single men and women and showed them the hospitality of the country.



Housing

The need for housing continues. With the difficulty in gaining work, the lack of SRSS and /the refusal of work rights means many in our housing are unable to move on into private rental, making way for new people facing homelessness. We continue to have about 120 in various forms of housing. BASP has been fortunate to be able to arrange housing for several newly arrived people with hosts in the community, thanks to the generosity of those offering a room in their homes. Some asylum seekers are granted work rights as soon as they lodge their protection visas whereas others are prevented from working- for what appears no logical reason. Either way, those early weeks are stressful, while familiarising with their new environment and seeking work. One host has been able to take in 2 men for 2 months before family arrive to use the 'spare' rooms. These host situations are usually for single people and they provide much appreciated support while they orient themselves.

We have had a number of referrals for women and children where we have been unable to help due to lack of housing options. A number of these women are fleeing their partners in Australia due to domestic violence- an increasing community wide issue.

Even when people are ready to move into private rental it can be hard for asylum seekers to be successful. Biggin and Scott in Sunshine have been very supportive of our efforts and have assisted with 2 rental properties in the last 2 months. We need more sympathetic agents in affordable areas for flats as well as houses. **Any contacts** you may have would be welcome.

Volunteer team work

BASP has had the use of a house owned by St Columba's School in Essendon for the past year. This has been a haven for single women on arrival in Australia while getting their bearings - and some income.

The school needed the house back for redevelopment in June, so the current five young women residents needed to move. 2, who are still waiting for income and / work rights moved to the FCJ share house in Epping and three, who currently have SRSS, sought private rental. Elizabeth began the process of helping them look and Karin followed it through, by finding a house in Sunshine. Moving day came and it was all hands on deck.



John and Mirzanu and Frances did the furniture removal. Viv moved the many bags and the women to the new house in a couple of trips. Karin did the Condition report and brought food and drinks at lunch time, Elizabeth brought the exhausted young women pizza and salad for dinner. It was a huge move, only made possible by the combined efforts of these good people.

Birthday Ideas?

We have had a couple of supporters who have asked for a donation to BASP instead of birthday presents for their birthdays. We have greatly appreciated this gesture.

A great idea for those who feel they have all they need.



John, one of our volunteers had some extra time available and asked where he could assist. We asked if he could befriend a recently arrived man, traumatised in his homeland and currently living in a BASP share house. He reported back: We met for a coffee on Thursday and I also took him to the football on Saturday. He is a nice man and seemed to appreciate the contact. As you know his main worries are loneliness and lack of money."

Jack and Mei are a couple who had 3 years in detention and were released 18 months ago without work rights. For an energetic young couple the idleness did not suit them, so we linked them to a not for profit organisation, solely run by volunteers. They have worked there 5 days a week over the past 12+ months and have been invaluable to the organisation. Due to their contribution, they were Finalists in the Friends of Refugees Awards for Service to the Community– pictured here with Gillian Triggs - who presented the awards.



In June, Brigid, Libby and Mary Clarke had the privilege of attending the wedding of a young woman from Somalia, who became part of a large Somali family seeking asylum and first met Brigid in detention. On release, BASP housed all 8 of this extended family as they started to familiarise themselves with Australian life. The bride attended the free university lectures for asylum seekers and then worked in local libraries.

Along the way she met her husband to be, a PhD student, through an online chess group. The relationship blossomed and the wedding was a wonderful mix of Somali and Australian traditions. It was heart-warming to see how welcomed the bride is into her new Aussie family and how proud the Somali ‘mum’ was of seeing one of her brood take this next step.

BASP is so fortunate to be able to call on its volunteers for a variety of support reasons.

Claire started visiting a woman with 4 children when they lived near her in Glen Iris. When the family moved to Reservoir, Claire has continued to visit, to support and assist in a variety of ways and to let BASP know when additional help is needed. This is such a valuable function.

Another volunteer, happy to assist in practical ways, has agreed to assist with regular shopping trips for a mother of 5 as well as sit with her children while the mother practices her driving. This is quite an ‘ask’ but the mother says she is an excellent driver!

Another small group of volunteers have been wonderful in assisting 2 sisters with 4 preschool children between them. They need help with child minding when one has an appointment and the other is at work. It is usually a request at short notice and what a difference this makes to the 2 young mums.

A very kind couple in Warrnambool, Christine and David, offered their second hand car to BASP to assist a person seeking asylum. The lucky person was Saeed and it has meant he has been able to get a job. This would not have been possible without a car. So thanks so much to Christine and David.



In the last newsletter, we reported on the arrival of twins to one of the women BASP had assisted.

In July, Star of the Sea made available a house near the school for this mum and her twins to move into. It was furnished beautifully with the support of the school community and BASP volunteer Jann provided transport for them to see and then move in.

The school and BASP communities have visited and supported them in linking with church and community contacts in the area.



Community Goodwill

In early June, a young mother with 3 children arrived at the BASP office, homeless and seeking help. Her husband, a doctor in Africa, had gone missing and the mother took an opportunity to flee capture and persecution, coming to Australia and seeking asylum.

She was from a rural environment and was happy to go to a regional area if we could arrange housing. How fortunate for this family that the Brigidine sisters in Echuca had a short term place available and a very large welcome mat.

Viv, a volunteer in Melbourne, ensured the family and all their baggage were on the right train for Echuca and Cecilia and Marg met them and helped them settle in. Within days, 2 of the children were in school and the mother was feeling a huge sense of relief to be amongst caring people.

They are now receiving SRSS- 89% of Centrelink and will soon be able to seek private rental.



Off to school in Echuca.



Our Place, Our Home | Melbourne Festival 2018
Sun 21 Oct 2018, 1pm-3pm
MPavilion, Queen Victoria Gardens St Kilda Road
Melbourne Festival is launched by the First Peoples of the land, and it's only fitting that it is signed off by our newest arrivals. *Our Place, Our Home* celebrates the extraordinary range of people making music in Victoria today, with performers tapping musical energies from Congolese, Oromo and Cuban cultures.

Free Concert in the Melbourne festival.

The young woman pictured is Mulu, well known to BASP, a passionate advocate for the Oromo people and a talented entertainer. She will be amongst the performers at the Melbourne Festival Event on October 21 from 1- 3

Trivia night success

A wonderful night—full of fun and community. The same amazing group of people at St Mary’s hall, Hampton. And they made \$5,300 for BASP!

We are very grateful to the organising committee, the MC (who comes up with amazing questions that some of us can’t answer!), her helper who does whizz things on the computer and makes recordings of music for participants to guess composers etc. and everyone else who generously help.



On the far right is our Delia Bradshaw—for many years the Chair of the BASP Council. The Grandmothers against the detention of children are a wonderful group.

Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

Food is being distributed very quickly at present. We have a lot of calls.

The things people need are



Sugar , flour , cooking oil, Cans of fruit

Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, biscuits, honey, noodles, basmati rice, dates

Gladwrap, tinfoil, pegs for hanging out washing,

Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches, Salt and pepper, Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger, Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste.

Toilet paper

We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products.

Quite a number of families have small children, so disposable nappies and wipes are an ongoing need.



Vouchers are really appreciated eg. for Coles, Big W, Kmart or similar stores; this allows individuals and families the independence to buy something they really want and need.

For anyone wishing to make a donation, the Project Bank details are: Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust
Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603; NAB.

Please put your name on the entry and if possible send us a message so that we can send you a receipt. This could be a text message on 0438 001 515 or an email to jcaldwell@basp.org.au.



Again thank you for your support, in whatever way you have been giving it to us.
There are many people in our community who have received help from BASP only because of you.



The needs of the whole cohort of those seeking protection in Australia keeps changing somewhat as the months and years of this dark chapter in our history continues. There are now many people who only have a Bridging Visa (often with no rights attached) after being here for eight or so years. Some people wait for years in between Bridging Visas to get a new one so they actually have no support or identity documents. Most have been in detention for a long time and many are severely traumatised. There is no systematic way available to care for them. There are others who have been in off-shore detention and have no idea about where they will end up being sent.

So thanks for all that you enable BASP to do.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)