Joint Senate Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network

2011

Submission (Individual)

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Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this Committee. I am writing from the perspective of an individual Australian citizen who is deeply concerned by what I have witnessed being done in my name. I believe that Australia's treatment of asylum seekers says more about us than it says about them. I will endeavour to address the terms of reference of this inquiry.

I am a mother, grandmother, teacher and regular visitor to a detention centre. I first became shocked by the system of mandatory detention when I began to investigate why a twelve year old boy in my class had a nervous twitch, was dreadfully disturbed, couldn't concentrate and lay on the street at the bus stop but was clearly very intelligent. I am happy to tell you that this boy is now an Australian citizen and is training to be a project manager. He has been able to achieve this in spite of spending more than a year in a two metre by two metre room, only being allowed out for ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the afternoon, until he threatened to kill himself if his family, father, pregnant mother and baby sister were not let out of the box. This success story can be and is the story of thousands of asylum seekers who come by boat to Australia. Imagine how much more they could achieve if they received a welcoming and supportive start.

a) any reforms needed to the current Immigration Detention Network in Australia;

Personally, I believe the most humane, sensible, low cost and low key approach to onshore processing is to *abolish mandatory detention and process asylum seekers in the community* as was done in the years before the Keating Government when the policy was introduced. Tweaking the policy of mandatory detention has proved problematic for governments and inhumane for those who are asking for asylum. Successive governments have painted themselves into a corner with the policy of mandatory detention which was ill conceived and ad hoc from its inception. Should parts of Australian territory be excised? Onshore versus offshore? Huge compensation cases! Back downs and cover ups. All these arise from the fact that mandatory detention is basically a form of abuse and even when governments try to be humane about it, they cannot, because, when someone's freedom is taken away the burden of duty of care is overwhelmingly and unrealistically onerous on the “jailer”. In short, abolish mandatory detention and replace it with a policy of *mandatory non detention and community processing.* What future prime minister will have to say “Sorry” to the generations of detained future Australians? When will we ever learn?

b) the impact of length of detention and the appropriateness of facilities and services for asylum seekers; (q) the length of time detainees have been held in the detention network, the reasons for their length of stay and the impact on the detention network

Given that there is still currently a system of mandatory detention the impact of length of detention requires comment. Over the months I have been visiting people in detention I have watched each

one's mental condition deteriorate. I don't know one long term detainee who has escaped this. Patrick McGory has famously called detention centres "*mental illness factories*". Even if they attempt to be very resourceful and are quite resilient people to begin with, learning English, cooking, exercising and so on, almost everyone I have met disintegrates under long term detention. All these pastimes fall into disorder as detainees slide into a pit of anxiety about the future and depression about their situation. I have spent hours trying to give some kind of support to young men who are nearing two years in incarceration. Several of them are on 24 hour suicide watch. One has tried to kill himself three times, another has frequently slashed himself out of hopelessness and frustration. Another has slashed his stomach 28 times with a razor. Another has been cut down from hanging himself with bedsheets by another inmate. Another, with electrician skills, has tried to do something with electricity in water in the bathroom and was saved by his dorm mate. Right now there is one young man who I fear will do something dreadful if his case is rejected again when he believes with all his heart that he will be killed if forced to return to his country. He thinks about death every day. He says, "At least I will just die in one day and not every day like I am in here. Every day I die in my mind. It's better to die in one day and finish." And the way he says it seems like not just idle teenage moodiness. These are the thoughts that preoccupy him daily in the same room month after month. He can't eat. He can't sleep. He can't concentrate. His mind is beginning to play tricks on him. And yet this same young man is a fantastic and enthusiastic soccer player, an artist and, although deprived of an education, is clearly very intelligent. As a teacher, I see he has intellectual curiosity which is not so common these days. Watching him collapse slowly is like watching a racehorse being hobbled. It's like a slow bleeding to death of the spirit. I can also tell you about another young detention centre friend who not only has lost lost twelve kilograms but has developed some kind of nerve problem and is now frequently confined to a wheel chair. As a teacher and a mother, whose job is to foster peoples' abilities and to help them be the best they can be I am disgusted by this government sponsored destructiveness.

This is what detainees have told me:

The first problem is that mandatory detention is *indefinite*. No one says after six months or one year you will be free, your case will be resolved. This is a clear source of anxiety in itself. Please see attached article below by Hadi Zaher. Dear Committee, please investigate why, when the government can spend *SO MUCH MONEY* on mandatory detention, they cannot speed up the processing time. Why can't ASIO and other government agencies put more manpower on the job to reduce detention times or, one must ask, is it intentional? As with the visa freeze, is the length of time people are kept in detention some perverse form of what is trying to be deterrence but is in reality what amounts to torture?

The next problem is the constant worry about their *families and the feeling of helplessness.* I see this is especially acute among the men who have wives and children that they are separated from. They feel keenly their responsibility to care for their family. They have a sense of hopelessness and shame when they cannot and this can even drive someone to attempt suicide. I have met someone who unfortunately succeeded. It was very sad and so unnecessary. This particular case was documented on SBS *dateline.*

Then, on top of the shock of leaving home and family under frightening circumstances, the dangerous journey, the shock of being detained when you have not committed a crime, the uncertainty about what will happen to them, there is the fact that '*every day is the same*' not just for weeks but then for months and then years. The same food, the same room, the cramped yard. This wears down everyone, perhaps especially young people who quite quickly develop a sense of hopelessness.

The above issues are of more concern to detainees than the fact that the taps don't drip or that there

is coloured play equipment in the compound. In general the physical facilities are sterile but adequate. It's the *indefinite* powerlessness, hopelessness and the lack of freedom, choice, privacy, and creativity that is so cruel. There are no torture marks on their bodies but the torture by bureaucracy is real and I have witnessed its effects.

r) processes for assessment of protection claims made by irregular maritime arrivals and other persons and the impact on the detention network

I will discuss this point next as I feel it is extremely important.

1. *Flawed Assessment System*: Perhaps the worst problem is that the assessment process is *capricious.* It is widely believed among asylum seekers that there is political interference in the determination of cases and that certain assessors interpret the frame of reference for asylum much more harshly than others and are influenced by personal prejudices. I have been told this time and time again and it engenders in the detainees an added sense of powerlessness and injustice and indeed at times anger. I believe that these repeated reports about bias, cherry picking and prejudice warrant investigation.

2. *Impact on Mental health*: Whether bias is true or not, nevertheless, people become paranoid when everyone else they arrived with obtain visas but not them or when particular groups are singled out, as when the visa freeze was put in place. I have seen that they can feel worthless and rejected to the point where they feel life is not worth living. Sometimes a whole family gets protection visas but one person is rejected or is held back. This can also be exacerbated when newer arrivals are processed and get visas before longer term detainees. They clearly believe in the truth and validity of their case and when it's rejected they go over and over the original experiences that happened back home that caused them to be so desperate as to flee and they don't move on from the trauma. For example, “ Why didn't he (the assessor) understand about the police hitting me. They hit me here and here. And my cousin was being dragged off to prison. It's even on youtube at the demonstration... What do I have to do to make him understand!”.

3. *Inadequate country information*: The other thing that really frustrates refugees is the inadequate or out of date information Australian authorities frequently seem to have about their country. Where does the information come from ? Does it filter down to each and every assessor? What tests are there that assessors actually keep themselves up to date? Is Australia including adequate, up to date information in the first place? For example, can an Australian assessor walk in the shoes of that asylum seeker should he /she be returned to his country of origin? Having a multi racial family and having lived overseas for many years, I'm very aware that who you are can impact on your experience. Whereas it might be safe to sit in the embassy somewhere or even go outside if you are “white”, it may be very unsafe to walk down that same street if you are from a target ethnic group or don't have the right connections or have upset some agent of a warlord or something. I'm not the only one who questions the adequacy of in country information. Recently William Maley has questioned the government's assessment of the situation in Afghanistan in it's decision to return a fifteen year old Hazara boy to Ghazni. I consider this a gross abuse of human rights. Even the most ill informed Australian knows that there is a war in Afghanistan and that even Australian soldiers are getting killed there.

4. *Reversal of onus of proof:* I am not a lawyer but a related problem that does impact on the mental health of detainees is the way our legal system seems to deal with refugee cases. In my view this needs to be reformed. It appears that the definition of what a refugee is is very narrowly defined and that the onus of proof is on the asylum seeker to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that he or she is genuine. And this proof must be at a very high level before the case is passed. *Guilty until proven innocent.* The assumption of innocence does not seem to apply. It seems to me that assessors

assume that the asylum seeker is lying and set out to prove this. One person I know was rejected it seems because he could not say exactly how many times the police hit him over the head. “Was it once or three times?” He has told me that his nose was broken and he was in extreme pain and felt very confused at the time and can't exactly remember. His focus was not on counting. Knowing what is now widely known about confused memory while being attacked and traumatised, even I am able to question the validity of this line of questioning. Not being believed when you are *not* in fact lying can make a person desperate and can lead to self harm.

5. *Deportation*: Indeed we cannot talk about the detention network and it's impact on the **clients** without mentioning *deportation* and the threat of possible deportation to danger that hangs over asylum seekers. I refer The Committee to the book and film “*A Well Founded Fear*” and “*Deported to Danger*” by Phil Glendenning, which document some of the shocking consequences of wrongful deportation to places like Afghanistan. Until they have their visa this threat hangs over them all. The introduction of the MOU with Afghanistan and the Malaysian “ Solution” make this issue currently relevant .

6 Political Spin and dehumanisation of asylum seekers: This impacts on the process for assessment and infests all other aspects of the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia. Isolation of asylum seekers in desert camps like Curtin and inaccessible offshore camps is a cruel and intentional policy to alienate the community from asylum seekers and to imply to the public that asylum seekers are to be feared. If it is NOT why else are camps situated in isolated areas? Asylum seekers are time and again vilified, demonised and slurred by innuendo in the media and in political speeches. I have heard the words “Many Australians have justifiable concerns” being announced on TV. We have laws against racial vilification and yet the leaders of our land frequently come the the very precipice of breaking these and go unchecked. The detention system, while giving the outward appearance of political correctness, is riddled with various means of sanitising what I find to be the sick, perverted and politicised way Australia views asylum seekers. One *small* example is the word *clients*, which implies that the user is in charge of the transaction and has a choice, which in this case he/she does not. If you start looking you will find many more examples. It is typical of the euphemistic spin used to sanitise what Australia is doing to refugees. The bottom line is that asylum seekers are being incarcerated, not for what they have done, but for who they are. I urge you all to ask yourselves what this says about *the type of society we really are* rather than the type of society we *tell ourselves we are.*

d) & e) the health, safety and wellbeing of asylum seekers, including specifically children, detained within the detention network;impact of detention on children and families, and viable alternatives; (m) any issues relating to interaction with States and Territories regarding the detention and processing of irregular maritime arrivals or other persons; (g) the impact, effectiveness and cost of mandatory detention and any alternatives, including community release;

1.Children: Although I have not worked extensively with children in detention, I have mentioned above the devastating effect of detention on a child I have taught. I have known others too who came to Australia as orphaned, unaccompanied minors, were trying by themselves to manage their case with Immigration without legal assistance. Over a period of eight years they grew into adulthood in and out of detention, with inconsistent/stop-start permission to study and work. Also the ground rules for a permanent visa for them were changed several times. It wreaked havoc on their lives and ended up with the older one being deported and the two brothers being separated from each other, their only relatives, because the assessor found that, although their story was believed, it didn't fit into the narrow definition for the current humanitarian category at the time. I have heard that the situation for children has improved but there still remain too many children in detention in Australia today. The tragic death of the young 19 year old Afghan boy in Scherger is particularly devastating. I would like to make the point here that childhood doesn't end the minute

someone turns 18. If you think of this with your own kids you know this to be true.Young adults are still very vulnerable, particularly unaccompanied ones.

2. Menfolk : Given that the majority of people in detention are men, they should be included in this. Perhaps even some Senate Committee members are men and can understand that men should not be left out. Can I point out here that men can also be very vulnerable in detention. Men are still someone's father, brother, son, husband. When they are mentally destroyed and become dysfunctional as I have recounted above, how can they be good fathers and husbands and learn new skills and become good providers and citizens? Please examine this question.

3. Safety and well being of asylum seekers in the detention network. First I would like to say that many of the guards are as kind as possible to detainees. However, the very system of mandatory detention puts an unequal power balance between jailer and client and leaves itself open to potential bullying and abuse.
I know someone who was held by the arms while a gang of several visa overstayer deportees of some sort, bashed him until his nose was broken and his face was so swollen and damaged that his eyesight is not what it used to be. I saw the damage with my own eyes. Some days later the victim was visited by a guard who farted in front of him and told him “That's what I think of you. Those ones that did this to you. They're good.” The whole incident is the subject of a complaint. Whatever the circumstances such behaviour by guards is reprehensible in their position of duty of care, even to “single males”. I have heard many instances of verbal abuse. A distressed interpreter reported to me that a woman who was going into labour with her first baby begged for her father and husband to be by her side while she gave birth but the guard just said, “No!” and “ Die! Die ! I hope you die!” That is just sadistic and should have no place in any government sponsored system.
I feel sure that there are bound to be many other cases of abuse out there in the detention system.

4. *Issues relating to States and Territories.* The only comment I have on this is that I am aware that detainees are frequently moved around the country for reasons such as health but also it can be done as a punishment, to be separated from support networks, if the detainee is considered to be “playing up”. Such measures are expensive and inappropriate, given that asylum seekers need all the support they can get from the community and from their friends.

5. COMMUNITY PROCESSING as a viable alternative.
It has been known *for years* that this option is the best, *healthiest, most just* and *cheapest* option and it is viable as was clearly shown by the years and years in which it was practised prior to the introduction of mandatory detention under the Keating Government. For years newcomers were welcomed and came and went without incident from migrant hostels such as Villawood. It's better that we return to this sort of thing where they can come and go, work, pay taxes go to school, tafe, uni and contribute as quickly as possible. Let me remind the Committee that refugees are a human resource. Is there, as I write, an Einstein being prodded with taser and removed to Malaysia? Even if a person is NOT super clever they can contribute in humble ways. We are an aging population. We need cleaners, aged care workers. Many long term detainees have valuable skills. I have sat round a table in a detention centre with a plumber, a builder, an electrician, a mechanic, an accountant and an IT worker. They asked, “Couldn't we be let out so we could help with the Queensland floods?” Meanwhile Australia is encouraging record levels of skilled migrants!!! What I know, from having been a teacher for years is that *some,(not all*) skilled migrants use Australia as a sort of dormitory place, or a place of education, while keeping their businesses offshore. I have observed that refugees don't do this. They know there is no going back. They are likely to become fully committed Australian citizens.

6. Essential Policy Shift in conjunction with community release.
Since the introduction of mandatory detention, maritime arrival has been made into a political issue

where there is no real intrinsic need for it, except that manufactured for the basest of political manipulation. Asylum seekers who arrive by boat are being increasingly demonised and criminalised. People arriving by plane are not detained in the same way and my understanding is that they are walking around in Australia without having undergone ASIO checks and nothing bad has happened. Perhaps the Malaysian "Deal" is to be the pinnacle of this war on asylum seekers, vying with the Tampa, Children Overboard and Siev X incidents, not to mention the Cornelia Rau et al. shambles. Dear committee members, please consider deeply so that Australia may learn from the lessons of history. Please, apply yourselves to the introduction of community processing, break out of the current mind set and use your creativity to rethink the entire way we treat onshore refugee claimants. Sorry to use a platitude here, but *"you have nothing to fear but fear itself."*

(o) the total costs of managing and maintaining the immigration detention network and processing irregular maritime arrivals or other detainees;(p) *the expansion of the immigration detention network, including the cost and process adopted to establish new facilities;*

COST!!!

Even if you have no conscience or empathy about asylum seekers this topic should make you think about our directions!! One billion and still counting per annum for mandatory detention!!! Locking up able bodied people who want to work! $76,000,000AUD for the Malaysian removals! Manus Island??? It's a bottomless pit. Why are these costs quarantined from the budget announcements? How many schools and hospitals could that money build? How many solar panels could it install? How many pensions? Why are disabled pensioners being forced into work but keen young asylum seekers are being disabled by the same government system? Even if one's maths is not very good it is easy to calculate that this is way more than the cost of living for each of the roughly 7000 persons in the detention system at the moment. It is certainly a lot more than someone can earn to qualify for Centrelink. So where does the money go? Naturally even a lay person can arrive at the answer. Big business. Big employer! Where do these employees live? Who are they likely to vote for?Detention is big business. I've watched those Serco guards coming to work, getting ready to be flown up to Christmas Island. I've got an idea of the cost of the airfare and of their salaries while at Christmas Island. Then there're the translators, counsellors, cooks, cleaners, maintenance staff etc... The whole edifice is quite a phenomenon. It's time to unravel it and reduce costs. If asylum seekers live in the community, go to work, do their own shopping, cooking, cleaning and I repeat once more pay taxes, they are not draining the system as they are *forced* to do now *against their will*. Even if essential translators and counsellors are employed the overall costs will be less. Meanwhile the left over money can be spent on education and new public housing. Those now employed as prison guards can go to work in other sectors just like when there is restructuring in other industries. There will be more schools and hospitals for them to work in. Australia will be a happier place and we will move on from the "*convictisation*" of our society and get rid of this nasty, festering sore in our midst.

Sadly, we are not doing this. Instead we are *expanding* the system!! The *expansion* of the detention network is a dismaying development and is definitely going in the *wrong* direction. We already know that mandatory detention doesn't work. Can't we learn anything form past mistakes? For example, $168,000,000 AUD for the expansion of Villawood is about $24,000 AUD per capita for every detainee currently in the system, enough for each one of them to get a university degree or start up a small business.Why are we wasting taxpayers' money like this? Why is this waste quarantined from public discussion and scrutiny?

(f) the effectiveness and long-term viability of outsourcing immigration detention centre

contracts to private providers;

The problems of out sourcing are clear and well known. Issues relate to whether the training is adequate, whether the oversight of duty of care is sufficient and clearly whether a company should be making money out of incarcerating people and whether they will be tempted to cut corners to boost profits at the expense of the welfare and safety of the *clients.* Breaches in all the above are frequently reported in the press and those would only be the tip of the iceberg. I have outlined above my own eye witness observations and my perspective that the system of detention itself is the problem.

(h) the reasons for and nature of riots and disturbances in detention facilities;
(n)the management of good order and public order with respect to the immigration detention network; (s) any other matters relevant to the above terms of reference.

Given the above recounts, I am personally of the view that it is the system of mandatory detention that is the crime. Criminalising its victims is not the answer. When you *take away hope* from someone through indefinite detention, threats of deportation to what they believe is extreme danger and sometimes *IS*, public vilification in the media and by politicians, you create someone with *nothing to lose*. Someone with nothing to lose can act desperately. On top of this is a pertinent fact that: "*Women do grief. Men do rage"*as identified very accurately by Germaine Greer. (Don't sneer. She's on the stamps) My life experience has taught me that this is very true and if you also think carefully about this you must surely agree. If you are a man you might be a "bottler" and keep the *rage* inside you where it could make you sick but some of you may be "squealers" who are prone to outbursts. If you put all this together in detention centre you have a volatile mix. One week before the protests at Villawood, I had the opportunity to talk with a very distressed, very young man who was feeling bitterly unjustly treated. As we walked round and round the play equipment he told me about his life, his story and family. They had all been accepted in Australia but not him, even though the reason for claiming asylum appeared to be similar. He was a big, powerful boy, a champion in martial arts who had represented his country at international events. He could do this for Australia, he said. Why didn't they understand? I felt entirely safe with him and he was very polite but he was clearly very disturbed and as we walked, I felt I was riding a storm cloud of immense power. Where was this stormy energy going to go all couped up in a room? I urged him to do *lots* of exercise as it was clear to me that he was designed to be very physically active and needed to channel his energy. Of course I couldn't keep up with him and had to let it go. Nagging wasn't going to work. He needed to run and jump. Without saying anything more than this I will ask you : What do you think happens when you try to keep unicorns in chicken coups?

Additionally, the following was said about Who? "They slashed paintings, *burnt buildings*, chained themselves to railings in order to gain attention for their cause." Yes, it was the suffragettes. This is what women had to do to get the vote. I do not advocate this but it is noteworthy that it happened. A hundred years later no one today would question that women should have the vote. It seems to me that the policy of mandatory, indefinite detention is on the wrong side of history. A hundred years from now it will be seen as something akin to slavery. So the sooner we get on with abolishing it the better.

With regard to the management of good order and public order in respect to the immigration detention network, it only needs to be said that if *there wasn't an immigration detention network it wouldn't be an issue.* If asylum seekers were living in the community without fuss and demonisation, just working quietly on their new lives no one would notice. There would not be a political problem. There would not be a law and order problem. I'm not saying that every single

asylum seeker is and angel but they are not criminals and should not be criminalised, which is what the current system invites/provokes them to do. I'm not saying there will never be an asylum seeker who misbehaves but it will just be of the order of what is normal in the community.

asylum seekers

1 Aug 2011

What Two Years In Detention Will Do

By Hadi Zaher

Waiting and uncertainty take a tremendous toll on asylum seekers detained for long periods. Hadi Zaher spoke to a recently released Afghan refugee about his experiences in detention

"I have lost the zest to live. The thoughts of my wife and children keep me alive", Ali tells me.

He looks fragile, his words are broken and his straight face gives way to sadness. Ali appears unable to put up a genuine smile, his eyes have sunk into their sockets, he appears emotionless and if you look closely at his face, you can make out the outline of his bones. After listening to Ali (not his real name) for an hour, I was left with the impression that his weak physique hides an even weaker mental and psychological state.

Ali is an Afghan asylum seeker who has only recently been released into the community after being detained — in his words imprisoned — for about two years, first on Christmas Island, then in Darwin and then for about two months in Melbourne before being sent out to a regional town for settlement. He is happy to have been released and recalls the moment of euphoria when he came out of Sydney Airport a few weeks ago and was told that he was a free man.

Ali had been a grain trader in Ghazni, a city in south-central Afghanistan. Despite the dangers, he had remained in the country during the civil war and under the Taliban. As an ethnic Hazara, he had had to face racism and religious persecution at the hands of the Taliban. He often had to pay double the normal price for food and rent and the Taliban check-posts charged him twice the regular "fee", describing the extra payment as "protection money from non-Muslims".

In 1998 Ali’s brother was killed when the Taliban captured the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif and massacred over 5000 people in a week, most of them ethnic Hazaras. He never got to see his brother’s remains or his exact burial place. The removal of the Taliban regime, Ali tells me, brought with it unprecedented happiness and joy for ordinary Afghans.

Unfortunately, by late 2005 the Taliban had returned. They controlled the highways and the countryside and occasionally conducted raids within the city. In March 2007, Ali received a "night letter" from the Taliban asking for protection money in exchange for letting his shop stay open. Traveling to and from Ghazni, passengers were stopped and searched by the Taliban who were

looking for signs of collaboration with the government, NGOs or Western forces. The Taliban took people’s money for what they called "public contribution towards the Jihad". In one such search, Ali was stripped of 20,000 afghanis, the money he had taken with him to purchase goods for his shop. When he went to report it to the local police, he was told that there was nothing the police or the authorities could do.

Instead, Ali became a marked man and the next night, the Taliban set his store alight for "collaboration with the police". Fearing for his life and those of his family, he sent his wife and children to stay with relatives and fled the country.

Ali finally arrived on Christmas Island in mid-2009, on his second attempt to make it to Australia on a leaky boat. On his first attempt three months earlier the boat sank and Ali, who can’t swim, was rescued by Indonesian fishermen. In the seven months before that Ali had spent a week in Indonesian jail, two nights in the jungle evading police and two weeks in a hotel with little food as he and others waited for their people smuggler to contact them.

Arriving on Christmas Island he thought his troubles were over but freedom was a long way off. Ali tells me that while in detention he was well kept and well fed — but confined to the walls of the detention centre. He did not know whether he would be released the next day, the next month, the next year — or whether he would be sent back to Afghanistan. It had already been a year since he last heard of his wife and his five children. The uncertainty of their fate compounded his own troubles.

While on Christmas Island Ali saw asylum seekers, some of whom had arrived after him, come and go. As others celebrated their release, he withdrew to an existence of isolation. After about three months, he was moved to another detention centre in hot and humid Darwin. There, Ali tells me, he was kept inside blocks that were humid, his clothing and garments were constantly moist and the airconditioner was running all day and all night.

After a few weeks he started feeling pain in both his legs. His appetite shrunk, he stopped mingling with fellow detainees and he stopped getting out of his block. He started going for days without food as he "did not feel hungry". At first he would sleep for days but later he had getting any sleep at all. He would stay awake all night staring at the sky, listening to the breeze, to the distant noise from the city and to the wailing of some his fellow detainees who he thought had "gone crazy". By day he would sit in his room worrying about his wife and children, the youngest of whom was only 2 months old when Ali had to flee.

Ali’s deteriorating condition was made worse but the refusal of his asylum application six months after his arrival. His subsequent appeal was turned down by the Independent Merits Review (IMR). He was told that it was very likely that he would be sent back.

During this time Ali had been able to see a visiting doctor. He had been prescribed medication for depression, sleeping pills, medication for appetite and pills for the increasing pain in both his legs. He had also lost about 20 kilograms. He would be easily irritated and frustration would lead to anger. His attention span became short and he would forget people’s names. He would attend English language classes but could not remember most of what he had been taught. Ali tells me that on many occasions he had overheard his fellow detainees talk about how he "had gone crazy".

In February this year Ali was put on a plane to Melbourne. He had thought that he was finally going to be released but that wasn’t the case. He was moved to a detention centre where his troubles continued and uncertainty was prolonged. He met many other detainees who faced similar situations and were in a terrible mental and physical state. Finally, in June this year, Ali got a letter from the Minister for Immigration, who had reviewed his case and granted him a visa. He could finally be certain about his life and future.

Today Ali carries with him a bag full of medication. He says that his condition has improved since his release but the mental scars of detention and confinement has left his mind "80 to 90 per

cent crippled".

He has spoken to his family and hears that the situation in his city and country has only worsened. He still suffers from a lack of appetite and usually eats only once every 24 hours. He takes sleeping pills regularly and wakes up multiple times at night. He is sad and every time he smiles, he looks like a different person.

However, Ali is grateful to the "the philanthropic government and people of Australia" for giving him and his fellow countrymen protection. He is grateful for being granted a second chance at life. He looks forward to settling in Australia and hopes to one day bring his wife and children to their new home.

Ali is just one of the asylum seekers who have been through Australia's mandatory detention system. His case underscores remarks made by mental health advocate Pat McGorry that detention centres are "factories for mental illness". Northern Territory Bishop Eugene Hurley agrees.

Earlier this year a 20-year-old Afghan asylum seeker committed suicide at the Scherger detention facility in Queensland. In September last year a Fijian asylum seeker committed suicide at the Villawood Detention Centre. Many more asylum seekers have attempted suicide. Immigration Department figures show that there were 1132 instances of actual or threatened self-harm in Australian detention centres during in the last 12 months.

These are sobering facts. They show what a powerful risk factor prolonged detention is for asylum seekers. The use of asylum seekers as political footballs and the failure of the detention system is making life worse for the very people who have come to our shores asking for help.