To the Joint Select Committee

I think this is powerful, authentic, relevant, tragic and contains a message that needs to be heard. I have known Hadi and his father for some years. He is a remarkable young man. He has been working pretty nearly full time and at the same time was a full time student at Woolongong Uni. He has just completed an Arts degree in Politics and next semester will undertake an honours degree. He is an Hazara and came to Australia by boat as a 10 year old. As you know 10 year old Hazaras who arrive by boat, today or tomorrow, will be sent to Malaysia to rot.

All the best

Bruce Haigh

"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 refugee 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 air conditioner 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. The Independent Merits Review (IMR) turned down his subsequent appeal. 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.

As the war in Afghanistan reaches its tenth anniversary, civilian casualties are at an all times high. Provinces previously considered safe are now effective battlefields. The government there can not defend its own officials, let alone the ordinary people. For those who flee these and other wars there are but few options. Only a very tiny number of these people ever make it to our shores and form an even tinier percentage of our refugee intake.

Under its Malaysia deal, the government plans to send hundreds of asylum seekers including young children to Malaysia – a country with questionable humanitarian record. This plan stands squarely against Australian humanitarianism and the values we uphold. The failure of the mandatory detention system and the Nauru debacle are precedents to this deal and strongly indicate that the repercussions for asylum seekers will be devastating. Scaring, indefinitely detaining or deterring already defenceless people including children is no big achievement and nothing to be proud of. For those who come to our shores seeking help, we can do better.