Inquiry: Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network.

I would like to make a submission to this inquiry based on my experience of visiting asylum seekers at the Woomera and Baxter detention centres in South Australia during 2003/04/05.

These are the points I would like to raise;

- All of the people that I visited and came to know personally had fled the most unimaginable violence, trauma and experiences of brutality against themselves and their families. They lived in very real fear of ever returning to their countries – Iran and Afghanistan.

- The system of mandatory detention over many years inflicts the most appalling mental suffering on it's inmates – this is on top of the trauma and mental suffering that these people have already experienced .

- This mental suffering is compounded by the loneliness and isolation experienced by many detainees because of the remoteness of many of Australia's detention centres.

- Although there were a few detention personnel who treated the detainees with some respect, in my experience the treatment of detainees and visitors as well, was cold, obstructionist and usually bullying.

  The rules and regulations that surrounded visits to detainees are designed to make the possibility of visiting asylum seekers as difficult as possible, and the aggressive and authoritarian manner of most of the detention centre employees made the experience even more difficult. The often arbitrary nature of what detainees and visitors could and couldn't do meant that there was never any certainty about whether you could actually see the person you had organised to see .This was devastating to someone who had waited weeks for some outside human contact and I could only interpret it as blatant cruelty.

- My very real impression of the current system of detention is that it is designed to break the spirit of those incarcerated so that they return to their countries of origin and deter others from considering seeking asylum in Australia.

- From my experience it seems to me that the system is designed to remove any sense of humanity from these suffering human beings - in the eyes of the detention providers and I am sad to say in the eyes of our department of immigration and both the Labour and Liberal Governments.

  It is a case of the ends justifies the means. The very system itself has no concern for the reality of what seeking asylum actually means; has no concern for what being a refugee actually means and has no concern for the immediate suffering or the long term mental damage that long term mandatory detention inflicts on detainees.

- Australian's and successive governments seem to have a completely irrational paranoia about refugees arriving by boat and about people smugglers .This paranoia has led to the development of the system of mandatory detention that we see today and the recent Malaysian deal.

- The reality is different. There ARE other alternatives . Alternatives that put the compassionate and humanitarian treatment of people at the centre of the system. Surely Australia has the brains and the creativity to propose some different models – we just need the political will to be open to other possibilities and the commitment of funds to make this possible.

- I would like to suggest that the length of mandatory detention needs to be limited to a maximum of three months – let's use the money spent on building more detention centres and staffing them, on more and better trained staff to process asylum claims quicker. After three months people should be supported to live in the community – without guards. Again let's use the money we spend on guards, on community social workers who are trained to work with and support vulnerable people.

- Unaccompanied minors and families with children should not be kept in detention centres or pseudo detention centres at all. We should be providing supported accommodation in the community for these people.

- A final decision on people's asylum claim should be made within a year.