

# Refugee Action Newsletter

21 March 2011

For updates on refugee and asylum seeker issues check out our website at

[www.refugeeaction.org](http://www.refugeeaction.org)

Email us on [mail@refugeeaction.org](mailto:mail@refugeeaction.org)

The Refugee Action Committee meets fortnightly at the ANU Room GO31. Watch our website for news of upcoming meetings and know that all Canberrans are welcome to join us. Interstate supporters can get ideas on help initiatives through our website links.

## In this issue:

1. Response to the current treatment of asylum seekers- rally this Tuesday.
2. Some facts
3. Blame detention centres not detainees
4. ASIO Deal to shift refugees fast
5. Time to Review our Mandatory Detention System
6. Uniting Church says detention on Christmas Island must end.

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## Close Christmas Island detention centre

## End mandatory detention

Let Your Voice be Heard- Come to the Rally:

**Tuesday 22 March, 5-6.15pm**

**Dept of Immigration and Citizenship,  
6 Chan St Belconnen**

Organised by the ACT Refugee Action Committee  
Call Peter on 0401960467 or Harry on 0433375501

Just in the past week we have seen...

- \*The use of tear gas and "bean bag rounds" on Christmas Island to subdue peaceful protests
- \*Yet another suicide by an asylum seeker (this time on the remote, inaccessible Scherger air force base in the Gulf of Carpentaria)
- \*More repressive practices in Curtin detention centre
- \*The near suicide of a boy in Boradmeadows detention centre
- \*Promises that ASIO will finally clear the backlog of security checks by the end of April

\*Renewed calls by the Uniting Church and HREOC for the closure of Christmas Island

WE NEED TO KEEP THE PRESSURE ON, and force a change in government policy.  
[www.refugeeaction.org](http://www.refugeeaction.org)

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## 2. Some Facts to note:

SINCE AUGUST 2010- that is in SEVEN MONTHS there have been  
4 SUICIDES in DETENTION and overall 5 DEATHS in DETENTION when we count in the  
young Afghan man who died of a heart attack in Curtin.  
This is an appalling death rate which is proof that the current system is in total systems  
failure.

Vulnerable people moved without warning.

THIRTY TWO detainees in Maribyrnong were despatched to Villawood on Sunday as an  
unknown group of detainees from Darwin were despatched to Maribyrnong Detention  
Centre.

Shifting the deck chairs on the Titanic! Is this a case of deliberate provocation to stir up  
unrest?

These are human beings with connections, relations and supports in Melbourne.

Without notice or explanation they were transplanted like used cars to Sydney as no  
doubt were the men from Darwin.

Among the men transferred today were some very vulnerable fragile men.

What does the department think will happen to these mentally unwell men?

### **"Twice now the police have launched attacks on peaceful protests inside the Christmas Island detention centre.**

A group of around 400 asylum seekers were walking in the open area of the detention  
centre in an attempt to speak to media representatives on the island.

The asylum seekers were carrying white sheets and strips of toilet paper to show that they  
were peaceful. "We asked, 'Please don't shoot.' " They even had flowers to give to the police  
within the centre.

The police said, "We cannot let you speak to the media. You must go back to your  
compounds."

After telling the protesters that police could help, when representatives of the asylum  
seekers met with the police, they were told again that they would not be allowed to speak  
with the media.

The police ordered the asylum seekers to return to their compounds and then used tear gas  
to disperse the peaceful crowd.

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## Blame detention centres, not detainees

Andrew Hamilton *Eureka Street*, March 21, 2011

Taken together the recent events in remote detention centres are both deplorable and predictable.

The disturbances at facilities housing minors, the use of tear gas against demonstrators at Christmas Island, the approval of such measures by the Minister the next day, the riots and destruction of property on Thursday evening after presently unspecified letters were received by detainees, the demonstrations in Curtin, and the death of a young asylum seeker in Weipa, are simply deplorable.

They cause grief to the detainees, to the officers supervising the centres, to the police and to the surrounding communities.

But these events are wholly predictable. When you place vulnerable people, mainly young men, in remote places for long periods of time, they are driven mad. Prolonged detention of vulnerable people for no just cause, with no set end and with nothing to do, does that to people. It is like building a nuclear reactor, putting fuel rods into it, and neglecting to provide water or to care for it.

When the detention centres are also overcrowded and under resourced, it is totally predictable that people will act out their frustration and anger. When people in such a place, without adequate access to advice and support, receive impersonal Government letters, presumably containing notices of rejection, it is predictable that they will express their despair and anger.

The Government recognised the destructive nature of indefinite detention when three years ago it announced that people would only be detained if they posed a security risk. But because they never passed legislation to enshrine this principle, we now have the present disastrous situation.

Money continues to be wasted in building and staffing remote detention centres that harm the mental health of the detainees and lead to incidents such as those which we see now.

Other Government decisions have contributed to the present deplorable situation. The earlier decision to suspend the processing of applications from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka has both extended the time for which many asylum seekers have been detained and deepened their sense of grievance.

They know that they have committed no crime and that Australia is committed to protect refugees without respect to how they arrive. They can only see the extra months that they spend in detention as a deliberate punishment.

The length of detention and the consequent injury suffered by asylum seekers have been compounded by the Government decision to require security clearances from ASIO before releasing refugees into the community. Many people have remained locked up for over a year waiting for this clearance.

This demand is discriminatory and unnecessary. Thousands of people are admitted into Australian society as tourists or students without such clearance. If it is needed, it can be secured while living within the community.

If the present detention policy remains, the likely consequences are unfortunately also quite predictable. Asylum seekers' mental health will continue to deteriorate. This will be reflected in more instances of self-harm and of violent protest.

Experience of police dealings with the mentally ill in many Australian states suggests that the responses to such protests will also become more violent and punitive, involving technology like stun guns and tasers. Politicians will defend their use, and blame the asylum seekers for creating the need for such measures. And if it comes to using guns and shooting asylum seekers who act out of mental illness, we shall be assured that it was necessary.

Those who defend the humanity of asylum seekers and criticise detention are used to being dismissed as bleeding hearts. Although name calling is not all that helpful, it would be tempting to respond by referring to those who defend the existing regime of detention as bleeding minds.

Could anything other than bleeding into the brain explain how one could defend the enormous financial outlay on detaining asylum seekers in remote areas, the prolongation of their detention in the sure knowledge that it will drive them crazy, the slowness of releasing children from such a regime, and the generation of conditions in which people will inevitably be injured and even killed.

Allowing asylum seekers into the community while their claims are processed would be a far more rational policy, both in economic and in ethical terms.

*Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of Eureka Street. He was previously associated with Jesuit Refugee Service.*

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## 4. ASIO deal to shift refugees fast

Extracts from : Paige Taylor and Lanai Vasek The Australian March 18, 2011 12:00AM

THE federal government has done a deal with ASIO to clear a backlog of about 900 asylum-seekers by the end of next month, as authorities on Christmas Island continue to struggle to control rioters who have given negotiators six demands.

Revelation of the deal came as Border Protection Command confirmed the interception of the 11th boat to arrive this year, carrying 145 people, the largest to arrive in Australian waters since February last year and the third-largest since November 2007.

There were more skirmishes at the Christmas Island detention centre yesterday, after fires, protests and escapes on Wednesday night.

So far, the Immigration Department has met one of the rioters' demands by promising that the 900-odd detainees found to be refugees but waiting for security checks from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation would have an answer about their futures within six weeks. Some have waited 18 months.

The deal, which The Australian has been told was struck on Wednesday, would not compromise national security, an Immigration spokesman said.

ASIO and Immigration were working in a "co-located" arrangement to "ensure more efficient processing of cases where this can reasonably be done" .....

The numbers of detainees found by Immigration to be refugees who are waiting in detention for security clearances has blown out from 330 in October.

During 2009, it took ASIO an average of 37 days to complete a security check for each asylum-seeker but it now takes 66 days.....

Immigration is pressing on with plans to ease pressure and tensions by shifting about 600 men to mainland detention facilities. A charter flight will take detainees off the island today for the fourth time this week.

Residents were due to air their grievances at a community meeting last night. Other demands are: that reviews must be expedited for rejected asylum-seekers; Immigration should provide more and better information about third-country options for rejected asylum-seekers; there should be more visits from the Immigration Detention Advisory Group; the Immigration Department should accept the claims of those who have been recognised as refugees by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; and act on commitments made during rioting last November.

The Australian has been told Immigration is considering other ways of quickening processing times, possibly by relying more on UNHCR information.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/asio-deal-to-shift-refugees-fast/story-fn59niix-1226023546259>

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## **5. Time to rethink our mandatory detention system**

Australian Human Rights Commission Thursday March 17, 2011.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has expressed concern about the incidents on Christmas Island over the past few days, during which tear gas and "bean-bag bullets" were

used against asylum-seekers in immigration detention, as well as incidents in other detention facilities.

Commission President and Human Rights Commissioner Catherine Branson QC said the ongoing nature of the incidents, including the reported use of tear gas again last night, was particularly disturbing.

"These incidents highlight the urgent need for the Australian Government to reconsider the system of mandatory and indefinite detention," Ms Branson said.

"The Commission is seriously troubled by the deteriorating situation in immigration detention facilities on Christmas Island and across the mainland.

"There are thousands of people being held in immigration detention facilities across Australia, many of whom have been held for six months or more," she said.

"It's particularly concerning that there are hundreds of people who have already been recognised as refugees but are still being held in detention while waiting for security clearances.

"People are being held in detention for long periods of time, without any certainty about when they might be released. We know from past history in Australia, that this can have devastating impacts on people's mental health and general wellbeing.

"The Commission has recommended for more than two years now that the Government stop holding people in detention on Christmas Island. Conditions have worsened over this time as overcrowding has increased," she said.

"Australia's system of mandatory and indefinite immigration detention was one of the key concerns raised by the international community during the recent United Nations Universal Periodic Review of Australia's human rights record," Ms Branson said.

"The Government should implement the risk-based approach to detention it announced in 2008.

"People should only be held in immigration detention if there is a risk that justifies detaining them. If no such risk exists, they should be allowed to reside in community-based alternatives to detention while their refugee claims are processed."

Media contact: Louise McDermott (02) 9284 9851 or 0419 258 597

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## **6. Detention on Christmas Island must end Says Uniting Church**

Thu 24/3/2011 Uniting Church in Australia

The Uniting Church in Australia has expressed its horror at the excessive use of force against asylum seekers on Christmas Island this past weekend.

The President of the Uniting Church in Australia, Rev Alistair Macrae said today, 'The confirmation by the Immigration Minister that "beanbag" bullets along with tear gas were used **against an unarmed group of people partaking in a peaceful demonstration** is of extreme concern to us.

'Uniting Church members around the country have expressed their own distress about this incident. We fear that this use of force against already traumatised people will compound their trauma and despair.

'This action is reminiscent of the worst of the Howard Government's punitive treatment of people seeking our protection. It appears that it was the deployment and actions of AFP officers that lead to an escalation of what had been a peaceful protest,' Alistair said.

'This incident confirms the total inappropriateness of immigration detention on Christmas Island,' said Rev Elenie Poulos, National Director of the Uniting Church's national justice and advocacy agency, UnitingJustice Australia.

'When you detain people for months on end in overcrowded and unsuitable conditions, providing little information about their case and prospects of release, it is understandable that their frustrations and desperation will boil over.

'While the Government's commitment to the removal of children and families from detention is a welcome step forward, it is clear from this event and the countless other incidents in detention centres across the country, including a hunger strike only recently ended at Villawood, that the detention environment is unfit for any human being – man, woman or child.

'The continued use of mandatory detention for asylum seekers on Christmas Island and in other locations on the mainland is a breach of Australia's international human rights obligations and our duty of care to vulnerable, traumatised people.

'We await the release of the full terms of reference for an independent inquiry into this incident which fully investigates the use of force in the detention environment. We also reiterate the Church's call for an end to the inhumane, damaging and costly policy of mandatory detention,' said Elenie.

<http://www.wa.uca.org.au/blog/detention-on-christmas-island-must-end/>

The Refugee Action Committee asks all concerned citizens to come and have your voices heard – our gathering is outside DIAC in Belconnen on Tuesday at lunch time.  
Thank you.