

Refugee Action Collective - Vic

Newsletter Feb 2005 - Baxter 2005 National Protest Special Issue

BAXTER 2005 - STAND UP TO HOWARD'S BARBARITY

EMMA LARKING AND TIM PETTERSON

Cornelia Rau is out of Baxter Detention Centre now. But for the people still inside, the horror of daily life-the beatings, the boredom, the isolation, and the constant fear of forced deportation-continues without pause.

This Easter people from around Australia will converge on Baxter. We will call for the centre's immediate closure, and for an end to Australia's mandatory detention regime.

Refugee Action Collective is organising buses from Melbourne, to get as many people as possible to protest. We need your help to make the protest a success.

People who arrive in Australia seeking refuge are treated with terrible brutality. Our government imprisons asylum seekers in appalling conditions for years on end, and tries to drive them to despair, depression, and suicide. No one's rights are reliably protected in a society which routinely deprives some people of such fundamental rights.

The Howard government wants us to ignore this basic truth. Its politics are politics of fear and xenophobia. It is about to start building a new \$336 million, 800 bed immigration prison on Christmas Island. It is deporting people to death or situations of grave danger; strengthening its ties with repressive regimes such as Iran; and using the military and multinational corporations in security roles which are not subject to judicial review or public scrutiny.

While the government grows more assertive in its abuse of power, concern in the community is increasing, but is often combined with political disillusionment. But apathy is not a luxury we can afford. Now is the time to engage the wider community in active protest and determined defiance.

Concerns that Baxter's management may impose a lock-down on the centre while we are there have been raised. There are also fears that detainees might be denied visitors from friends over the Easter weekend-a popular time to visit

the centre.

But whether we are outside the gates or not, punishment and repression are the stuff of detainees' daily lives at Baxter, and a necessary part of the increasingly sophisticated methods of control used by GSL and DIMIA. The arbitrary use of violence inside detention centres will continue until we put an end to mandatory detention.

The most effective means of galvanising public opposition to mandatory detention is to expose its grotesque reality. Protesting at Baxter allows us to highlight the reality of 'immigration detention' in a way which is immediate and confronting. Ordinary people will be given the rare opportunity to see what this highly fortified prison looks like; and for a moment they will be denied the comfortable option of forgetting that it even exists.

All the groups so far involved in building Baxter 05 are in agreement about one thing: we want to make this a creative and peaceful action. Our aim is to give the media attractive images of a protest which is not about violence or conflict, but about humanity and human solidarity.

Our chances of achieving that aim improve every time another individual or organisation joins or supports or endorses the protest.

So take a stand and demand real justice-help us close Baxter and free the refugees.

Get on the bus! Buses leave Trades Hall, Carlton, on Thursday evening, 24 March 2005, and return to Melbourne Monday, 28 March. You must book well in advance to secure a seat. Please make a donation if you cannot go, and think about sending a banner identifying yourself or your organisation. Banners will provide a colourful way of demonstrating the diversity of support for the protest.

How to book: Cheques to RAC (Vic), PO Box 578, Carlton South 3053 (include your name, address a stamp and envelope) OR make a transfer to RAC's

Coming Refugee Events:

Protest at Emirates Airlines: Oppose deportations of refugees! Emirates admits carrying out deportations. Come along to their Melbourne office and tell them what you think of this!

When: 12.30pm Fri Feb 18

Where: 257 Collins St, CBD

Baxter 2005 National

Convergence: This Easter, converge on Baxter detention centre and demand its closure.

When: 8pm Thurs 24th March to Mon 28th March

Where: Baxter Detention Centre, Port Augusta, South Australia

bank account, Commonwealth Bank BSB: 063 262 1025 2396, then email us (refugeeaction@mail.com) to tell us you've done it (include name, address, so we can post your ticket).

Can't make it but still want to help build the protest? RAC has tens of thousands of leaflets and posters to publicise the protest. Call (03) 9659 3505 and we'll send you some.

آزادی
Azadi

justice for refugees

SYDNEY: POLICE RAID REFUGEE SUPPORTERS

TONY DEWBERRY

Supporters of refugee rights have been subjected to a series of police raids in NSW and Qld. Nine early morning raids were carried out in December of last year and another Sydney home was raided on the 8th of February this year. As a result of the December raids four people were charged for allegedly assisting escaped refugees to obtain passports.

Charges against one of the four were dropped before anybody faced court, leaving three, Goudkamp, John Morris and Sunil Menon. Charges against Goudkamp were dropped due to flaws in the prosecutions evidence. He was overseas on the day he was accused of making a false statement in relation to a passport application. And when Morris and Menon last faced court they won an adjournment due to the vagueness of the charges against them.

That the government has carried out further raids, and wants to proceed

with its prosecution despite the weakness of its case, shows there is an element of harassment in their actions. In the December raids three homes associated with one person were raided. One house was searched for several hours and large amounts of documents were taken away. And yet that person was not charged at all. So, while the authorities didn't find anything useful for prosecution they no doubt now have a lot of information on the open, legal activities of the refugee rights movement.

That is certainly how the Refugee Action Coalition in Sydney sees it. In their press statement on the February raid Ian Rantoul of RAC Sydney said,

"It is blatant harassment of refugee activists and blatant political use of the federal police. The government has been embarrassed by the failure of their actions so far and they are now under a lot of pressure from the reve-

lations of the abuse of Cornelia Rau in Baxter detention centre. There has been tremendous support for those charged with the assisting the refugees. The raid on yet another refugee activist will ensure even greater determination to see an end to this kind of harassment of refugee activists and to see the outstanding charges dropped. Given what the public has found out about the treatments dished out to Cornelia, no one would think it a crime to assist refugees. The federal police actions do however throw a further doubt over their supposed independence and raise more questions about the independence of the inquiry into the detention of Cornelia Rau."

In Sydney a Drop the Charges committee has been formed and RAC in Melbourne has expressed its solidarity with those facing charges.

BAXTER 03:

RAC's Jerome Small interviews a first-time detention centre protestor

What motivated you to go to Baxter in 2003?

The first motivation I guess was what happened the previous year in Woomera, which was extremely inspiring. Protests within the detention centre and outside resulted in a breakout of many people.

Baxter had been set up late in 2002 and it was really vicious. It was set up expressly to make people accept deportation, with really harsh conditions. When refugees protested the guards used tear gas and beatings, and their phone calls and mail were cut off for six weeks. More and more we were getting concerned about what was happening, and when the decision to go to Baxter was made, I decided to go along.

Had you had much experience of protests before that?

Well, I had never had any experience of that sort of protest. The protests I had been to were in the city, where there was a lot more media and general public.

This protest was out in the middle of the desert, there were riot police, it was definitely a new experience.

"They were able to hear us cheering and it helped them to find the strength to carry on."

What did you take out of that protest?

I guess the main thing is that it really galvanised my resolve to continue. Sometimes it seems just a little bit abstract when you just read about things. When you actually go to a detention centre and see the conditions and see how harsh the environment is, see the rows of razor wire and electrified fences and that kind of thing, you just really get a sense of how

inhumane the system is. It just galvanises your determination to continue in the movement.

Secondly, it was worthwhile because of the effect it had on the refugees inside. We had phone contact with refugees inside. There were people that had been in there a long time who could be forgiven for thinking that the whole world had forgotten about them. They were able to hear us cheering and it helped them to find the strength to carry on.

What would you say to someone who has heard about the Baxter 2005 protest and is debating about whether to come?

I think this is definitely something that people should do. It's one thing to be angry about what's going on in Australia, but it's something else again to get involved and do something concrete. I think it's really important - and people should go.

SRI LANKAN REFUGEES FACE DOUBLE DEVASTATION

FELICITY JOSEPH

On Christmas Eve 2004, 525 Sri Lankan refugees on E-class Bridging Visas received letters from DIMIA ordering them to leave the country within 28 days. Only two days later, on Boxing Day 2004, the devastating tsunami hit Sri Lanka and other Asian countries, causing widespread harm and loss to many people who were poor and struggling to begin with.

DIMIA's response was simply to say that Sri Lankans with visa concerns will be treated on a "case by case" basis; a small number of Sri Lankans have received 1- or 2-month extensions to date, while the rest are waiting in constant fear of deportation. This is not good enough. Most other countries have at least temporarily halted deportations for Sri Lankans as a group (for instance, the UK has extended the visas of Sri Lankan refugees until April 2005). Australia has been priding itself on its 'generosity' to Asians in the wake of the tsunami, but for Sri Lankans desperately seeking a safe place to live there is no generosity for them, only the double devastation of the tsunami and the constant threat of deporta-

tion.

The conditions of an E-class Bridging Visa, which many Sri Lankans are on, are particularly cruel: under this visa refugees have no work rights and no eligibility for Centrelink payments. They are completely reliant on charity and church groups to physically and mentally support them. They are not eligible for "onshore" applications, even for the many who have Australian-recognised work qualifications, because such claims are restricted to those on A-class Visas

Most of the Sri Lankans seeking asylum in Australia are Tamils, a cultural group whose members have fled Sri Lanka over the last ten years because of war and terrorism in that country. Most have been in Australia for several years, and some have even had children born here. It is the Tamil areas in north-east Sri Lanka that have been especially hard hit by the tsunami - in fact, 90 per cent of the Sri Lankan refugees in Australia are from the tsunami-affected areas.

As of September last year, there was estimated to be about 800,000 Tamils

displaced within Sri Lanka - and that was before the tsunami struck. The landscape and living conditions of Sri Lanka have become even more devastated since Christmas last year, yet still there is no appropriate response from DIMIA.

And let's not forget that there are still 15 Sri Lankan asylum seekers locked up in Baxter Detention Centre in South Australia, 10 of whom are known to have families located in the tsunami-affected areas of Sri Lanka. Baxter was the scene of hunger strikes and sit-ins in September last year, when the Sri Lankans banded together to protest and resist their indefinite incarceration in that hell hole. They are still there to this day.

RAC will continue to campaign for permanent visas for the Sri Lankan refugees and the freeing of the 15 still in Baxter. Join us in this campaign and on our trip to Baxter, where we will support the Sri Lankans in their bid for freedom.

EMIRATES AIRLINES - DEPORTATION CLASS

JAMES BRENNAN

We all saw the devastation the Boxing Day tsunami caused. It seemed even politicians were willing to lend a hand to help out, most notably Peter Garrett throwing off the suit to perform with Midnight Oil one last time for charity.

But for John Howard, the tsunami was the perfect distraction - an opportunity to start aggressively deporting refugees to uncertain futures whilst people's attention was focused on the disaster. Within a day of the tsunami, the entire Baktiyari family had been forcibly deported to Pakistan - despite being Afghanis, not Pakistanis.

Ever since Howard's re-election last year, the government has stepped up its campaign of deporting refugees. The way these people are deported shows that the government knows full-well the dangers deportees face at the end of their

flights.

In many cases, refugees facing deportation have been sedated, bashed and abused by detention centre guards. During



deportations, refugees have been drugged and accompanied by up to eight guards.

One of the major companies involved in deportations has been Emirates Airlines. Emirates have been complicit in deporting refugees to unsafe countries. In response to this, RAC has called for a boy-

cott of Emirates until they publicly state that they will no longer participate in forced deportations.

A national day of action against Emirates was called on February 1st. Protestors gathered at Emirates offices around the country to oppose deportations and to provide a voice to those silenced. But there's still a long way to go! Join RAC in voicing your anger against Emirates and join the boycott of Emirates, and join the upcoming protest outside Emirates' Melbourne office on Friday 18th Feb to keep up the pressure.

Rally against Emirates' complicity in deportations:

Friday 18 Feb, 12.30 pm at Emirates' Melbourne office, 257 Collins St, Melbourne CBD.

WHO'S IN BAXTER?

JEROME SMALL

A man asks for medicine to help him sleep. In the past, when he hasn't slept his stressed out mind has sped up until it has snapped. He is turned down for medicine. He can't sleep. He is stressed. After asking again and again and being turned down, he cuts himself, across the chest. He is put into Management Unit, a part of Baxter used to isolate and 'manage' troublesome detainees. Then, finally, he is given the medication he needs. It is four years since he was first put in detention.

A woman is in another compound, also part of the 'management' process. She is terrified, out of control. She cries, she screams, she tears her clothes off and eats dirt. Guards laugh at her. Other detainees express their concern for a fellow human being. Their friends outside try to organise a psychiatrist to see her, but are told that, because she is mad, she can't sign the required forms. She has been in some form of detention for almost a year, and in Baxter for four months. Her family think she is dead.

Baxter is an obscenity. A place designed to make human beings and their stories disappear from the world.

At the start of February there were 205 men, 15 women, two children in Baxter. Another 22 women and children were interned in the residential housing project in nearby Port Augusta-still locked up and guarded after years of detention, still legally barred from Australia.

They are people like Ardeshir Gholipour-a writer, political dissident and boilermaker from Iran. He did 21 months in Iran's notorious Evin prison. He has now spent more than twice that in Australia's detention centres.

They are people like the 57 Afghan refugees in Baxter who were told before the election that, after losing years of their lives, they were finally going to get visas. Most of them are still inside. People like the 16 Sri Lankans who staged a protest from mid September until December. Their hunger strike ended after the Department indicated it was going to re-examine their cases. They are still waiting.

People like Daryoush Hooshmand Nejad, a union activist who has been imprisoned by the Howard Government for more than four years, one of a group of Iranian men who went on hunger strike before to Christmas. Increasingly, the people in Baxter aren't those seeking asylum. They are from Canada, New Zealand, China or Malaysia. People with stories that we don't even hear, who some bureaucracy, here or overseas, says must be shifted across a border.

And of course, the people in Baxter are people like Cornelia Rau. People failed by the variety of systems that are supposedly there to look after us, who end up in a maximum security environment, locked down for 18 to 20 hours a

day, when what they need is some human help.

All of which is to say, the people in Baxter are people like you and me. What started as a jail for refugees has become, more and more clearly, a jail for any of us. Baxter is a hideous holding pen for ordinary people.

In one of the many anti-Government letters that have found their way into the Herald-Sun about the Cornelia Rau scandal, Chas Becket from Paynesville writes: 'One deep concern for me about the treatment of asylum seekers, apart from the human rights issue, was that the Government would start to treat citizens the same way. My fear has come to pass.'

The Cornelia Rau scandal has gone a long way towards exposing the Government's dirty little secret of Baxter. A lot of people have now heard of the place for the first time. Many more have had their concerns about mandatory detention confirmed and amplified. And for others, it becomes clearer that the treatment of refugees in this country is an issue which vitally concerns each one of us.

By rallying in large numbers at the gates of Baxter this Easter, we can help to keep the spotlight on the obscenity of Baxter, on the human beings locked away in it, and on our determination to shut it down.

THE BAXTER PROTEST: HOW YOU CAN HELP OUT

ANDREW CHEESEMAN

Refugee Action Collective needs your help!

The campaign to free the refugees will only be won with the active involvement of myriad different people. We need your help to keep up the campaign against Howard's racism.

What you can do...

§ Come to Baxter. Visit the RAC(Vic) website www.rac-vic.org for details of how to book a seat on the bus. Buses will depart in the evening from Trades Hall, cnr Lygon & Victoria Streets, Carlton, on Thursday, 24 March 2005, and will return to Melbourne on Monday, 28 March. You must book well in advance to secure a seat.

§ Send delegates and/or a banner to Baxter. Banners will provide a colourful way of demonstrating the diversity of support for the protest.

§ Endorse the Baxter protest.

§ Provide a statement in support of the protest. We will publicise it for you.

§ Send out a Media Release with details of your Baxter endorsement/support. Please provide RAC with a copy.

§ Donate money to support RAC campaigns. Send a cheque to RAC(Vic), PO Box 578, Carlton South 3053, or deposit your donation to RAC's bank account, Commonwealth Bank BSB 063 262 1025

2396

§ Disseminate information about Baxter via your website or email lists-or drop into the RAC office to collect posters and leaflets.

§ Visit the Baxter 05 website: <http://baxter05.info>, and join the Baxter 05 discussion list.

§ Join us at RAC meetings, held every Tuesday at 6pm at Trades Hall, cnr Lygon & Victoria Streets, Carlton. New people are always welcome, and everyone has a say.

§ Contact RAC - you can call us on (03) 9659 3505, check out www.rac-vic.org, or email us at refugeeaction@mail.com.