

Curtin Detention Centre Visit July 20th, 2002

Notes and impressions by Dennis Black

Having recently visited detainees at Perth and at Port Hedland, I should have been somewhat prepared for the Curtin 'experience'. However, it quickly became apparent after entry that the knot in pit of my stomach was well justified. Kate, Emma, Barb and myself were among the few visitors ever allowed in, and it isn't difficult to see why access was so restricted.

The saga had begun months ago when Kate started to traverse the red tape. Her mighty efforts resulted in approval for four of us to visit on Thursday July 18th, but (surprise, surprise) en route from Broome early that morning she rang to confirm and was told we would not be allowed in. The reason? We had been associated with that nasty, subversive mob on the Freedom Bus. Needless to say, we were more than a little pissed off. We returned to Broome to regroup and rethink, and that afternoon (thanks mainly to Kate and Emma's never-say-die attitudes) we began a major campaign to pressure the Curtin management and their Canberra bosses to let us in. All of us rang our refugee advocacy contacts to organise fax and phone pressure. It must have worked, because the decision was reversed by Friday afternoon. All that remained was for Kate to convince the Curtin manager to let us in on Saturday instead of Monday.

It must be mentioned, however, that one of our group (Barb) was not content to let the fax campaign run its course. We had come prepared to camp outside the main gate to the airbase, if necessary, and Barb insisted on doing it still—vowing to remain until the bureaucracy was breeched! She encamped late on Friday afternoon, was ordered away, ignored the order and all this elicited a watchful presence of ACM officers in the gatehouse adjacent. But when word came of the reversed decision, her valiant two-hour siege was ended, and she (reluctant) was rescued.

Saturday, 8:45am. We rolled up to the gate in our ludicrously tiny red rental vehicle. Ominously, the ACM guards at the gatehouse had been replaced by APS officers (blue overalls, sunglasses and baseball caps), apparently in honour of our visit. Our id's were scrutinised and confirmed with the comment from under one of the caps "these are the four". We piled back into the car to be escorted through the gate and 800 metres down the road to the detention centre, where we were officially handed over to the ACM staff at the entrance. While we parked and unloaded donations, the APS officer watched from his vehicle, keeping Australia safe.

The ACM officers explained the rules and searched the donations. Packaging was dislodged and contents perused, soft drinks were opened and sniffed. Surprisingly, the personal searches were not as careful as those at the other centres, though we still had to empty our pockets. Given that we only allowed one day to meet a lot of people, the long delays were frustrating (and no doubt intended). The four of us were then led into the centre proper and after snaking through a myriad of temporary buildings escorted by two guards we were set up in one of the empty structures for the visits. Kate had to supply the names and numbers of the people we were to meet, with approximate times.

We were allowed four visitors at a time. There was a forced evacuation of the premises from 11:00 – 1:00 for lunch, when we were escorted back outside the main gate by APS officers. After lunch we were only allowed to stay until shortly after four. The net result of the time restrictions and delays was that we were able to meet two groups of people in the morning and five in the afternoon, although the final visits only lasted a few minutes.

The physical conditions are very basic, well suited to a prison. The fences and razor wire that circumscribe the place make it clear what is going on here. This is a place of captivity and punishment. The isolation insures that outside contact will be minimal and escape fleeting. As a visitor, I can never know what it is like to live within such confinement—to suffer the dust and the oppressive heat during the day and the cold at night within this bleak, confined space....the monotony of the food, the imposed routines, the erratic educational opportunities for the children, the boredom, the omnipresent guards.

It is difficult to describe the intense emotions resulting from the meetings. These are decent, warm and gentle people, who all have horror stories that they have carried from their home countries. They are also survivors. But their desire to escape tyranny and oppression has been foiled by this government, from whom they are awarded more of the same. Many of them were understandably suspicious of us, having had no positive contact with an Australian previously. An experience shared by many of the young men is that they were placed in solitary confinement when they first arrived, often losing contact with their families in their home countries during this period. Those who have escaped detention and been recaptured may spend varying amounts of time in prison. To a man they say that prison conditions are better than those in the centres. The most unforgivable behaviour, though, has to be the neglect of the rights of the children in this hole. Where else in the ‘civilised’ world are children imprisoned for the alleged crimes of their parents?!

There are a lot of haunting images I am left with from Curtin.....that of a whole family in tears, tears of despair but at the same time joy that we were there , and we listened, and we believed their story.....an enormous bear of a man who hugged me, and kissed my cheeks, and gripped my hand, tears welling in his eyes.....a tiny boy who wandered curiously within the group, patting each of us on the knee, while his older sister translated the terrors of their mother’s life.....the depressed young man, desperate for freedom, who mumbled “I feel like an animal in a cage. I look out through the fence and the kangaroos are free”.

We escaped late in the afternoon, emotionally drained. I left feeling guilty, because I could leave. We drove to the Derby pier just in time to catch the sunset, a small group of care bears (the term applied derisively to ACM guards who dare to display any humanity) mingling with a sea of blissfully ignorant tourists. The sunset was perfect, but on that day seemed somehow perverse.