

## Reflecting on Christmas Island experience

by Lizzie Finnerty RSM

*"What ever work we do,  
our song must be about mercy and fidelity,  
righteousness and peace. (Ps. 101)  
Because of the Lord, to whom we sing our song,  
we must join in the search  
for justice and love wherever we are..." Mercy Constitutions 4.06*

This year I spent a short six weeks on Christmas Island. It was an experience that will live with me for a life time. I have been reflecting on why this is, as I have been to more challenging places, both physically and psychologically. The more I ponder the question, the stronger I feel that it is because the suffering experienced on Christmas Island is exacerbated by the treatment of Australians.

Christmas Island is 2600kms from Perth, 5600kms from Canberra and only 450kms from Indonesia. It has been excised from the Australian Migration Zone for the sole purpose of preventing the asylum seekers from having the same rights of appeal as those asylum seekers on the mainland.

Every person has a right to seek asylum from persecution. No one would sell all their possessions, borrow large sums of money and leave their homeland which they love, in unsafe boats unless they are at risk.

As one asylum seeker wrote in a letter to Kevin Rudd:

*"Our journey across the oceans are fraught with danger and many of the unsafe leaky vessels have been lost with the deaths of all on board. We have also had to sell all our assets in order to raise enough money for our voyage. Seeking asylum in a foreign land is not something anyone considers lightly – we have all left behind loved ones, given up all our possessions to embark upon a journey with an uncertain future, where there are no guarantees. The fact that we embarked on this journey, sacrificing all that we have, knowing the substantial risks and uncertain outcomes, must provide some incite [sic] into the hell we are running away from."*

The asylum seekers on Christmas Island are prisoners though they have committed no crime. The men who have come without wife or young children are housed in high security facilities. The family groups and unaccompanied minors are also housed in detention. While it is not high security, there are guards present in all areas. People do not even have the privacy of their rooms as the guards can open their doors without knocking at anytime day or night. The asylum seekers cannot leave the facility without accompaniment by a guard. No going down to the market or for a walk. Their meals are cooked for them; there is little flavour or variety. Curry and rice for lunch, rice and curry for tea. In family detention, the people eat in the area called 'The Wet Mess'. I feel this is another way of depersonalizing and dehumanizing the asylum seekers. Why could they not just call it the dining room?

Mr Rudd stated at the last election that no child would be held in detention – and if it was necessary – it would be for the shortest possible time. When I left Christmas Island there were 164 children in the Detention Centre and the children of middle primary years could not attend

school. There was still one family in community detention and when they leave, this program of community detention will be discontinued on the island.

The biggest problem for the asylum seekers is boredom. There is very little to do in the centres. There are basic English classes, Australian classes and a gym. The asylum seekers happily attend these for the first few weeks after their arrival. But as the weeks drag on and there is little or no information about their cases available, and the rumours and negative reporting about asylum seekers from the mainland filters through, they become anxious, depressed and unable to concentrate. They have poor sleep patterns. They are not encouraged to do anything manual which could channel some of their frustrations. There are no veggie gardens and the small flower beds and grass are tended to by a gardener who was imported from the former Baxter Detention Centre.

When visiting the asylum seekers each day, our conversations would often begin with a question about the English language or Australia but very quickly they would move to their own stories. I stand in awe at the trust these people put in a stranger. I think they felt safe and secure talking to me knowing I was not attached to those in charge of the detention centre or from Immigration. When listening to them I wondered how anyone could endure so much suffering.

Not long before I left Christmas Island a husband and wife and their 10 year old daughter arrived from Sri Lanka. The mothers face was blank. During the last offensive by the government army, their village was bombed and obliterated. The wife was critically injured, but worse, their two younger children were killed. They said the villagers who remain in Sri Lanka are still living in a refugee camp that is targeted by the military and bandits who take their young girls, rape them and discard them to die.

Mr Rudd says that Sri Lanka is safe enough for the Tamils to return, but I ask the question, "Who would return to put their family in danger of further atrocities?"

Most of the asylum seekers are from minority groups who have fled from such terrible suffering and persecution. One asylum seeker told me that if they (the perpetrators) would just kill them then they would not have fled their homeland that they love. But, he said, when they kill, they torture and mutilate so that his people endure the most terrible suffering and humiliation in their dying.

The Hazara people from Afghanistan, whose features are different and so are easily identifiable, have been persecuted for a very long time by all other tribal groups in the country. Now with the rise of the Taliban, the Hazara are even more at risk. Members of the Taliban are assured of a passage to heaven if they have killed one Hazara but if they kill more than one they are doubly assured and are presented with a medallion to wear around their necks. A woman on Christmas Island told me that her husband had been made to watch his brother brutally mutilated and murdered. She worries about him because he is very quiet and withdrawn.

There are so many stories like these told by those seeking asylum on Christmas Island. Yet, these people sit in limbo waiting in uncertainty and with diminishing hope.

**The question to us all now is:  
What can we do to be messengers of hope in this present climate?**

**We have a responsibility to ensure that the asylum seekers are treated  
with respect and with dignity, with compassion and with justice.  
So how can we do this?**

I feel that the more we can speak out:

- the more people will learn the human side of this tragedy;
- the more people will understand that refugees do not have to be poor but they do have to have a sense of persecution and danger in the country from which they are fleeing.

We can lobby the politicians and write letters to our ministers. But most importantly, we must change the language we use when speaking about asylum seekers to try and undo the damage and recolour the message to one of hope and peace for our fragile world.

*"...Calling one another to conversion of heart, to fidelity in mercy, we must continue to proclaim the loving kindness of God, and create the new earth which God's love demands." (Rev. 21:1)*  
*Mercy Constitutions 4.06*

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