
Community voices – transcript – OH 636/2

Inese Petersons.

Extract of an Oral History by a teacher at Woomera Detention Centre in 2001; it details the conditions under which detainees lived while waiting for their visas to be processed.

... so the people who didn't get to the second interview, and there was a delay in their processing would be put into a separate compound. They were screened in the sense that that were not allowed to have any newspapers, live television, only videos and pre-recorded information that the Department of immigration said was ok for them to see.

What about that first group who did have all their papers. Can we talk about that as well?

And the people who were waiting for their second interview were not allowed to have any contact with their relatives or friends. They were not allowed to send out any information and they were not allowed to receive any information. So some of these people could have been sitting there and were there for 4 or 5 months.

You're getting much closer to the analogy of a real prisoner.

Yes. No contact with the outside world. And we were not allowed to give them any information about outside.

You were still allowed to teach them?

Yes. English, that was it.

Without any of the cultural or give them other infrastructure?

That's it, nothing that would give them information about the outside world. This group of people were actually most dysfunctional in a sense because they couldn't get any news about what was happening with their visas. If they asked they were just told ...we weren't allowed to say anything, not allowed to talk about their visa processing. We didn't know but we weren't even allowed to say that. We would say we're sorry, you need to talk to DIMA, the Department of Immigration people. And they of course couldn't phone home so a lot of their folk would consider that they had died or something bad had happened to them because they hadn't heard from then in so long. And that was the conditions they were left in until there was some movement in their processing.

And of course, because there were difficulties in processing their visa and because a lot of the Afghanis, their country just had no infrastructure left. And if there were any ever records anywhere they were long since disappeared or had been destroyed. And as a rule they are a fairly agrarian culture, most of them don't know when they were born, they don't know their birthdays, I doubt if they even had birth certificates. It is very hard for the Afghani people to come up with the information that is required by DIMA. So a lot of the Afghani people initially were just put into a compound and left there because they couldn't be checked up on.