

## Children in Detention: as reported by Sri Lankan mother of 3, May '14

Names: Mum = S, Dad = Y, daughter (eldest child) = A, 2<sup>nd</sup> child/ boy = Ab, 3<sup>rd</sup> child, boy born in detention = V. Most of the comments & memories reported by S are from daughter 'A', now 9 years old. The family are Tamils who escaped bombing & other violence in Sri Lanka in 2009. The family escaped to Malaysia then Indonesia before getting to Christmas Island (CI). In Indonesia, the family separated with Y going ahead alone, in the hope of finding safety for the family. Thus, S & both children arrived separately. On arrival at CI, 'A' was 5 years old, 'Ab' was approx 2 years & V hadn't been born. After approx 1 year (during which time 'V' was born) the family was moved to Villawood in Sydney where they stayed for 3 years. ('A' is now 9 years old, Ab is 6 & V is 3 years).

When in detention, the family was deemed a 'security risk' by ASIO. This meant they experienced more restrictions & harsher conditions than other detainees. The children frequently asked their parents for explanations for their treatment & were described by them as often 'sad & quiet'. It is perhaps significant that 'A' recently commented when reviewing the few photos she has of herself from detention, that she wasn't smiling in any of them, indicating she saw her time there as unhappy. This is in contrast to recent photos taken after their release.

Also, some relatively innocuous events have clearly bothered 'A' because of the unpleasant association with detention experiences. For example, the family recently planned to buy a car. 'S' saw a car near their house & said it might be suitable for the family. 'A' got very distressed about this & said repeatedly 'I hate that car....don't buy that car'. She then explained the car was the same as the one she was locked into each day while being taken to & from school by guards. Other experiences include the following:

- The children were frequently witness to actions of officials that appeared unfair. This mostly affected 'A' who, being older, could understand more about what was going on than her brother. For example, on arrival at CI, 'A' saw her mother receive the visa they'd been promised. Within minutes, however, her mother was asked to hand it back to the same official who'd just given it. They were then told they no longer had a visa & this meant they were 'illegal' & would have to be detained. Even though 'A' was too young to appreciate the detail of this event, she realised a promise had been broken & considered it 'cheating' (her word).
- Initially, in both CI & Villawood, the children were denied access to play areas & activities that other children could attend (& even school for the first 2 months). The children frequently asked their parents why they could not play like the other children but this was hard to answer as they didn't know the reason behind it. The children therefore experienced frequent confusion & disappointment at what appeared to be an unjustified punishment. (1)

- (At school, in the community) 'A' & brother often felt different & inferior to their non-detained peers. 'A' was concerned when her teacher explained that 'naughty' children – those who'd done something wrong – would be punished by having to stay in *detention*. She told her mum this must mean the whole family was considered 'bad' or criminals as they were *all* in detention. 'A' is a well behaved child & it was quite shameful & humiliating for her to be considered 'bad' or naughty in any way.
- Feeling embarrassed: 'A' was often asked by school mates who were the people bringing her to school each day & why did they keep changing – these were guards who changed according to shift .
- This was a hard thing to explain as the guards were neither family nor close friends & were also connected to the 'detention' word. It was embarrassing & sometimes distressing to have these strangers escort her to school. It was also unpleasant to see her father go through metal detection & other security measures each day when he took the children to the office prior to school. It was an added negative reminder of how the family was viewed by those in charge. Recently (May '14) 'A' was asked to draw a scene of something she remembered from detention. She drew the security procedure prior to school, with her & brother standing to one side looking on while a guard ran some sort of a detector over her father's clothes. (This picture is being supplied to the Commission).

One guard added to her feelings of discomfort by insisting she express gratitude each day for the act of taking her to school.

This person had an unpleasant attitude & frequently remarked that 'A' & family should consider themselves lucky to get the treatment they were receiving. 'A' disliked having to give an insincere 'thank you' to this person as well as generally being made to feel bad.

- In CI, there was some prolonged hot weather & Y renewed his requests that the children be allowed access to the swimming pool. Eventually, permission was given. Because the children were unfamiliar with the pool, Y waded into the water to help them. Almost immediately he was ordered out – apparently this action was not allowed. He & children were then told their permission to use the pool was cancelled so the 'privilege' ended before they'd even started to swim. This was humiliating for all concerned as well as a hugely disappointing. The sudden retraction of permission was never fully explained.
- 'S' became pregnant on C Island. This was unplanned. 'S' was ambivalent to the pregnancy at first, fearing the difficulty of both a pregnancy & birth in a detention centre. On the other hand, she didn't want to abort a healthy baby & eventually resolved to continue with her pregnancy.

- (Continued from above). The family's case-worker was adamant that this was a bad idea. She told S on a daily basis for several weeks that if she accepted the offer of an abortion, it would guarantee the family swift processing & relocation to Perth.

This built into sustained pressure & S became very agitated, wept & showed other signs of distress in front of her children. It exacerbated the anxiety she already experienced as a result of the trauma of witnessing bombing & death in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the children were forced to become witnesses to their mother's emotional pain without understanding what caused it & often they cried too. The actions of this case worker finally ended when a lawyer was put in touch with the family who used his influence to have the case worker changed.

- When in detention, 'A' often asked her parents when they would be free to walk down a street together like they were able to do in peaceful times. In all the time in detention, the family was only allowed out as a family once & this was only because some kindly guards were prepared to bend some rules when one of the children had a birthday. The guards used their own money to give the family the cost of a meal at McDonald's. What really pleased the family, however, was being allowed walk down a street together with the guards trailing them at a distance, giving them the impression of freedom. This is still remembered as a happy moment from this period.
- Sadly, some of the kinder guards & detention centre employees found that working in detention troubled them to such an extent that they couldn't continue working there & a number of them resigned. They considered the family's treatment unfair. Some guards could appear unfriendly & hostile & these were often the guards the children came to dislike.
- Because of the restricted access to play areas in the early weeks in detention, the family got into the habit of staying indoors. With little to amuse them, 'S' took to trying to teach the children using whatever books, pencils etc were available. Both parents highly value education which meant they continued to promote good study habits once the children were allowed access to formal schooling. It is worth mentioning, therefore, that in spite of the lack of freedom they experienced, both children did well at school. 'A' in particular, went from 'Best in class' awards to achieving a rare 'Best in school' award. It is significant that while the children were very happy when the family was released from detention, they were sad to leave their friends & school. Happily, the children continue to do well in their current school & are flourishing in their new found freedom & safety.
- (The above submission was typed by Yvette Dempsey based on conversations, mostly with 'S' & most of which was recorded for authenticity. 30/5/14) (3)



time

08:30/

5



## NOTES WITH "A"'S DRAWING

The picture is about going to school, outside the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre.

"A" and her younger brother (and at times other children in detention) were mostly escorted to school by SERCO guards, different ones depending who was rostered on duty. This drew comment from their school friends "who are those people that bring you to school?"

Sometimes the children's Father was allowed to go too. In the picture you can see Father in the brown shirt on the right being "frisked" with a metal detector (or similar) by a SERCO guard (the dude in the dark glasses), while the guard in the office hands out three pass cards for the trip outside the wire, to the blonde SERCO guard. This morning and afternoon routine of checking in and checking out takes place in block 5.

Quite some way away, Mother is left behind with baby sister in the family residential housing in detention, part of the Villawood complex. The tree and chair are separate from Mother and baby, because for many months after being transferred to Villawood, the family were not allowed into the garden and recreation/play areas – the reason being that the parents were subject to an unknown adverse ASIO security assessment. The children's Mother home schooled them for many months in Villawood, before the children were allowed to go to school. Once at school, the children proved their resilience and keenness to study, "A", quickly rising from "best in class" to "best in school".

