



Darwin Asylum Seeker Support and Advocacy Network

VISITOR PACK - DASSAN

(with great thanks to our friends at TASS
– Tasmanian Asylum Seekers Support)

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1. About DASSAN

DASSAN (Darwin Asylum Seekers Support and Advocacy Network) was set up in response to growing concerns about asylum seekers in detention in Darwin. DASSAN members visit and write letters to people in detention, write letters to media and politicians, spread information, advocate for individuals and on asylum issues in general, organise public events and much more. We provide an interstate link for advocacy, or people who wish to donate goods or offer support. All people interested in supporting and advocating for asylum seekers are welcome to join us.

Visiting people in detention

DASSAN is not a registered NGO and we do not coordinate a visiting program but we do provide concerned individuals from the community with the name of a detainee who has requested a visit. You are then responsible for organising your own visits. This pack will show you how to do that.

If you'd like to volunteer at the detention centres for group activities etc

Contact St Vincent de Paul – Fergal Fleming at volunteer.nt@svdpnt.org.au. SVDP will organise security checks and training.

2. Visiting the NIDC and the DAL

What you will need to do to start visiting

First of all, you will need to fill in two forms:

1. SERCO's 'Visitor Application' form:

http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/_pdf/idc-visitor-application-form.pdf

2. SERCO's 'Conditions of Entry' form:

http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/_pdf/idc-visitor-conditions-of-entry.pdf

You must complete the visitor application form *every* time you wish to visit a detainee, and the conditions of entry form the first time. The forms must

be received at least 24 hours in advance of your intended visit and you may be refused permission to visit.

At the top of form 1, you will need to state the name of the detainee you wish to visit.

If you are visiting someone who is under 18, you will need to have an Ochre Card.

What if there is a problem?

Living in detention is a difficult, sometimes harrowing, experience for many detainees. Coping with the physical and psychological distress, isolation and uncertainty, on top of previous trauma, drives some to the brink of despair.

In this kind of environment, it is likely that there will be problems that come to your attention. It is important that we go through the right channels to remedy these problems where possible and that we also take care of our own needs as volunteers.

If the person you are visiting has an unmet need

The first person to contact is the caseworker for that detainee. They will be able to advise you of what is currently being done about the problem and if there is anything you can do to help.

DASSAN is not a service provider. Our volunteers go to offer welcome and support, and there may be things which upset you but which are beyond your control.

It is important that you don't make promises to your friend that you can't keep, and that you follow the correct channels in seeking help. If you don't know what the correct channels are, DASSAN will help you find out.

Please do NOT go to the media with a story, even if it is at the request of your friend. Their application for a visa may be negatively impacted, and the regime they have fled may impose repercussions for them or their family if their story becomes public.

If you need support

DASSAN provides opportunities for peer support and debriefing

DASSAN can also provide you with a range of professional contacts who may be able to answer your questions or offer you support. The most important of these is a counsellor who works in private practice and has experience in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Please speak up if you are feeling negatively affected by your experiences: you don't have to go through it alone.

If you can't continue visiting

There is always a chance that (for whatever reason) a visitor will be unable to form a respectful and positive relationship with a detainee. Or there is also a chance that a seemingly positive relationship will come to an abrupt end due to unforeseen circumstances.

DASSAN has no control over this situation and we do not have the capacity to set up a screening process for all volunteers and detainees to set up a perfect match. Problems of this nature will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis within our limited capacity, so please be patient.

Friendship Starters

The following list was provided by a TASS (Tasmanian Asylum Seekers Support) member:

- **Dominoes** (Huge hit, particularly with older Arabic speaking males).
- **Chess** (taken rather seriously by many).
- **Uno** (always popular, using two packs means lot of players get involved and is great to practice English colours and numbers).
- **Deck of cards** (Rummy is very popular with Tamils, whilst the Middle Eastern men usually prefer hakam, a four player game that initially seems complex but is easy with practice).
- **Friendship bracelets** (Pre cut short lengths of wool. Not only is this great to encourage companionship, but it gives clients something to do after volunteers leave).
- **Atlas** (Great for sharing where everyone is from and stimulating conversation).
- **Map of Australia** (the clients are often very interested in Australia, where they are now, where cities are, what each city is like)
- **Jenga** (Never before have I seen so many adult males enthralled by such a game. No English necessary, provides much needed laughter and appeals to all cultural groups).
- **Musical instruments** (a bongo drum or guitar communicate in all languages and often draws clients in).

Discussion starters:

You may like to bring in some photos of your life and of Darwin or Australia generally, bring in a copy of the local paper, or discuss music, food, or sport.

Even though you might feel curious or concerned, do not press your new friend for details about his/her experience of persecution, the state of his family, his experience in detention, his visa application process, or other potentially upsetting topics. He may broach these things with you in time,

but as a friend you are there to provide relief and diversion, and a chance to feel human again.

Awareness of cultural sensitivities:

Many of the detainees are from an Islamic cultural background so visitors should be aware that some of our cultural ‘norms’ may not be appropriate. For example:

- women and men usually do not touch each other (unless they are family members), so a warm smile and a nod may be a more appropriate greeting than a handshake.
- dress appropriately – you can leave your hair uncovered but please dress modestly, cover your knees and shoulders and avoid low-cut tops.
- if your friend is observing Ramadan (the Muslim holy month of fasting during daylight hours), it would be polite to avoid eating or drinking in front of them.
- Other gestures and body language, such as ‘thumbs up’ or sitting with your feet pointing at someone, may be considered rude.

The general rule is, if you want to know if something is culturally acceptable, just ask! Discussing cultural norms is one way that we can learn more about each other.

For further information on culturally appropriate behavior, please go to: <http://www.nceis.unimelb.edu.au/school-education/learning-one-another>

Visiting information provided by DIAC:

DASSAN strongly recommends that all potential visitors to the NIDC and the DAL read the information provided by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) on the website below. This site also includes links to suggested gifts as well as items not allowed in detention. <http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/visiting/>

3. General information

Country background information

People detained in Darwin will mostly come from Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran and Sri Lanka. The following is a brief outline of the country background information

Afghanistan

The current caseload of Afghan asylum seekers mostly consists of ethnic Hazaras, most of who are Shi'a Muslims.

Hazara's are a distinct ethnic group, making up approximately 9% of Afghanistan's population. The two largest ethnic groups are Pashtuns and Tajiks who make up 42% and 27% respectively. Most Hazaras live in the mountainous central region of the country known as the Hazarajat, this is an isolated harsh terrain and climate and economic conditions are generally poor. Outside of the Hazarajat there is a significant number of Hazaras who now live in Kabul city. Traditionally the Hazara have been marginalised politically and economically and treated as an underclass of Afghan society, working in the most menial jobs.

Applicants who claim that they are Hazara say that they fear persecution from the Taliban or other Afghans due to being identified as members of the Hazara race. Claims may relate to personal experience or the experiences of family members occurring recently or some years ago. Key claims referring specifically to race include:

- fear of being harassed or killed by the Taliban
- fear of being attacked by Kuchi nomads (see also Land Disputes)
- fear of being attacked and/or discriminated against by the general Pashtun population.

Shi'a Muslim applicants fear persecution because of their religion; this includes a generalised fear of persecution due to religious belief and associated historic events, of being forced to change religion or leave the country and being unable to celebrate religious ceremonies due to the presence of the Taliban. There is currently a freeze in Australia on processing asylum applications from Afghanistan.

Iran

Since 2005 Iran's Government and authorities have been under the control of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, widely seen by Western governments and Iran watchers as conservative and authoritarian. June 2009 elections that saw Ahmadinejad re-elected were widely condemned as neither free, nor fair. It has been reported that since the post-election protests in 2009 there has been a crackdown on Iranians perceived to be opponents of the regime and the Islamic Republic.

Many Iranian asylum seekers in Australia's detention centres are university students and political opponents of the Iranian government.

Iranian laws continue to discriminate against religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims (representing about 10% population) in employment and education. They similarly target converts to Christianity for questioning and arrest.

The government restricts cultural and political activities among the Azeri, Kurdish and Arab minorities including the organisations that focus on social issues.

Iraq

Dr Philip Marfleet, from the University of East London, says conditions for thousands of Iraqi refugees across the Middle East are growing worse by the day and he has called on Australia to increase its intake of Iraqi refugees to help ease the situation.

"More and more people from Iraq and other crisis zones are likely to seek sanctuary in Australia ... I would describe it as a chronic crisis," he said. "It's extremely likely, I think, that over the coming years we will see more and more Iraqis emerging into the smuggling networks."

Hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled Iraq to Jordan, Syria and other surrounding countries since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Many are teachers, doctors and other professionals with their families. Now many of them are trapped in a limbo between temporary settlement and a new home. They cannot return to Iraq because they have been marked by militias for revenge, or they fear their children could be kidnapped.

Indonesia

Some of the Indonesian detainees are accused of smuggling asylum seekers.

More than 200 Indonesian crewmen are in custody in Australia's immigration detention centres facing charges that carry penalties of up to 20 years' jail.

Most are actually believed to be poor fishermen who were duped by smuggling organisers into working on asylum seeker boats travelling from Indonesia to Australia. Nonetheless, many have been waiting for months for charges to be laid or their cases to be heard.

Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman Teuku Faizasyah said most of the detainees were unaware of the stiff penalties that awaited them once caught. "They know how to manage the boat, they know how to get to some point, but they're . . . incidentally part of this people-smuggling," Mr Faizasyah told The Australian. He said it must be "clearly differentiated" who was organising the boats and who was merely sailing them. He said

there had been cases of Indonesians accepting what they thought were tourist jobs, only to be told they must continue on to Australia.

Sri Lanka (Tamils)

Tamils are a Dravidian language group originating in very ancient South Indian regions including Sri Lanka. Tamils have been in Sri Lanka for many centuries and supported the great 1000 year old Sinhala civilisation with their advanced technology and agricultural methods so they are as much a part of the place as anyone else. In Epic Hindu stories such as a Ramayana, Lanka features strongly with an ancient land bridge to South India. During the long Colonial rule in Sri Lanka the divide and rule tactic was exercised which divided ethnic groups and led to post colonial conflict as in the case of Sri Lanka. Here in Australia Tamils from all over the world, including Sri Lanka make up diverse Sri Lankan and Indian communities. The Language of Tamil is significant in unifying Tamils and there is a strong distinction made between the Sinhalese speaking and Tamil speaking Sri Lankan groups. This has been heightened in legislation during Post colonial times and from 1948. The recent war is very complicated and spanned more than 2 decades. The Sri Lankan government authorities tends to treat all ethnic Tamils as potential or suspect Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or “Tigers” even if they don’t support armed conflict in Sri Lanka. All Tamils have been discriminated against by the Sri Lankan government whether “Tiger” or otherwise.

Even though there have been some differences of opinion between India and Sri Lanka on the colonial, post colonial periods and on the recent war in Sri Lanka, politically India’s relationship with Sri Lanka remains cold since the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi two decades ago. Tamils in Sri Lanka have fought violence, discrimination and inequality. They have found many ways to do this: by passively leaving, by fighting and/or dying and by subservience which they are doing now and as we saw on four corners recently in the war crime against Tamils depicted there. The current Sri Lankan government has crushed the Tamil independent movement killing tens of thousands and forcing many Tamils to flee in fear of their lives (see - Four Corners, ABC July 2011). Sri Lankan’s in detention centres here in Australia are often young and born into these war periods. They have experienced trauma over long periods. Many men, women and children have been tortured and have experienced violent crimes against them by authorities. Many have family still there that they fear for, many have lost family in despicable circumstances. Generally, in Australia, Tamil language groups are able to connect through language, religions and belonging where ever they originate. The majority of Tamils are Hindu, but many are also Christian and Muslim as well. Here in Darwin Tamils communities are very diverse and the main group is centred around the Hindu Temple. The community is very supportive of refugees as almost all of the community here come from this group in Sri Lanka.

Dealing with the effects of Trauma

Be aware that the detainees may have experienced many levels of trauma. For most, the fact that they are being detained is an ongoing traumatic experience. Some may not experience the full impact until many years after the events.

One definition of trauma is the response to an event that causes a prolonged alarm reaction, where the body is primed and pumped with chemical and enzymes such as adrenaline and does not calm down for a long time. This creates an altered neurological state in the individual. The severity depends on previous experiences and availability of support. *(Calmer Classrooms, State of Victoria Child Safety Commissioner, 2007)*

Agencies that work with individuals who have experienced trauma work towards recovery goals. Your visiting supports these goals by working towards restoring connections to others who care and restoring dignity and value. Individuals can overcome the effects of trauma by expressing their feeling and retelling their experience; however, retelling (disclosing) about the trauma happens at an individual's own discretion (pressure to talk is not therapeutic).

The opportunity to regularly visit an individual in detention may lead to developing a rapport and consequently they may trust you enough to feel comfortable sharing some of their traumatic experience with you. This can sometimes catch people feeling unprepared or not knowing what to say or do.

The following are some tips from agencies that work with people who have experienced trauma. Remember you are not a counsellor and that the last tip refers to helping the individual to access the appropriate support.

Responding:

Listen and acknowledge - *sometimes it is best to just listen, leave enough time for people express their thoughts, particularly if they are learning to speak English.*

Indicate that their response is usual- *remember people just want to feel normal, human.*

Affirm and acknowledge their reaction, whatever it is- *some detainees may not even consider their emotions or reactions as a trauma response until it is suggested to them. Respond to the feelings rather than the content.*

Acknowledge bravery

Offer follow up and support- *there will be health services provided including counselling for the detainees, check with DASSAN for referral processes. Also there will potentially be other activities happening that you could encourage the individual to participate in as well as offering to return and visit or write.*

Indications for referral:

Any of the following where persistent, suggest the need for a referral:

- Uncontrolled or frequent crying, reactions to mild stress situations
- Sleep problems , too much or too little
- Depression
- Shame and guilt
- Inability to trust
- Anxiety, easily startled
- Eating disorders
- Anger
- Stress related physical illness; headaches, stomach aches
- Inability to forget traumatic scenes
- Preoccupation with one idea
- Blunting of emotions
- Nightmares
- Extreme dependency or clinging
- Suicidal thoughts
- Withdrawal

Managing Emotional Reactions

It is important to be aware of your own emotional reactions when interacting with individuals who have experienced trauma. It can be expected that you may be influenced/ impacted by your interactions with the detainees and it is important that you are conscious of finding a way to balance this in your life. One way to do this that is recommended is to be able to express your inner feelings and experiences in words.

DASSAN encourages all volunteer supporters to:

- Connect with other visitors for support
- Visit in pairs –this way you can be travel buddies as well as being able to debrief thoughts before you go home.
- Contact DASSAN immediately if you think you or your friend may need to be referred for extra support.

4. Contact details

DASSAN: dassan2011@gmail.com

DASSAN website: stay tuned!

DASSAN on facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/174664215912814

Other useful links:

Refugee Council of Australia www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Amnesty International www.rethinkrefugees.com.au

www.rethinkrefugees.com.au

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre www.asrc.org.au

Tasmanian Asylum Seeker Support <http://www.tasasylum.org/>

Refugee Rights Action Network rran.org

Asylum seekers christmas Island <http://asci.org.au/demo/>

Refugee Action Coalition : <http://refugeeaction.org.au/>

Chilout : <http://www.chilout.org/>