

Enough said

It's time for change on refugee policy.

By Nina Boddenberg

It is hard to find the words to begin, even though the subject of justice for Australia's refugees is something I am very passionate about. This should be my shining moment to display my intimate knowledge of refugee issues. My chance to put across an opinion that will finally persuade every Australian to change their stance on this most debated of subjects. Where are the intelligent arguments I am seeking? Why is my mind a blank when I know this issue as completely as I know these fingers sitting paralyzed on my keyboard?

Perhaps my proximity to this issue is the problem; or perhaps it is that there is really little to say on this matter that hasn't been said before. Haven't we all heard the reasons why Australia's treatment of refugees is inhumane? It seems to me that everything that can be said to persuade people has been said, in many ways and places. There have been newspaper articles, radio programs, rock concerts, political rallies, and television documentaries. Reports have been written, leaflets have been distributed, and fences have been torn down.

But at the end of each day, we still have people behind razor wire. We still have children behind razor wire. We still have asylum seekers on bridging visas who are



not allowed to work and are not entitled to Centrelink payments. We still have refugees living in limbo on 3- year temporary protection visas. It seems that no matter how much is said on this issue, we still can not offer any compassion to our fellow humans in their time of need.

All I have to offer on this subject is the perspective of someone who has spent many years working with refugees; and knows the government's policy as something that brings suffering on well-loved friends. My plea is an emotional one, but I refuse to be ashamed of this. I was taught to write objectively on social issues, to prove my argument on the grounds of reason and logic. Yet now I write with my heart bared, as there appears to be no other way to express this aching I feel at having friends locked away in prisons, when no crime has been committed. A young man from Iran who loves playing soccer and cooking. A teenage girl from Afghanistan who writes poetry about peace. These are real people and they suffer real pain.

I don't mind being labelled as a 'bleeding heart'; my heart does bleed for the

refugees I know, for their pain in detention and their painstaking struggles to start a life after incarceration.

My heart also bleeds for those refugees I do not know, as many of their stories would be so very familiar. I wonder at anyone whose heart did not bleed at hearing a woman tell of being tortured in an Iraqi jail. I wonder at all those in this country that will not weep along with people who have lost their sons or fathers or sisters or mothers. I wonder at the hardness of humans to allow children to be in situations that hurt them so deeply they stop speaking, or spend years waking every night in terror.

I have met so many refugees with the same stories, the same hopelessness and fear. I have made friends with these people; held their babies, eaten their food and laughed at their jokes. These are people: they are not terrorists or fanatics or something too foreign to understand. They are just people fleeing fear and searching for freedom. I have found these refugees, who often have so little in this world, to be the most generous and compassionate of humans. I have learnt so much from people who have arrived here by boat; they have touched my heart and opened my soul to empathy.

Perhaps it is time that Australians stopped debating the intricacies of this issue. Maybe we should stop with all these words. Instead let us sit down with the refugees in this country and just listen to their stories. Let's give every Australian the chance to share a meal with those who seek to share this country; and then ask them to decide if these people are as different as commonly believed.

Nimbin's aid reaches its mark

This time last year, the world reeled in awe at the destructive power of nature, as the full extent of the damage was becoming clear in the wake of the largest tsunami ever recorded.

Nimbin responded quickly and generously, with major fundraising on New Year's Eve and Australia Day last year at the Bowling Club raising over \$4,000 for relief. The question was, where to send it?

Rather than throw it into one of the giant fundraising bodies, it was hoped to be able to support a specific project, and if possible, develop an on-going relationship with a particular village as it recovered.

Fortunately Chris Bonnor, president of the Secondary Principals Council of NSW, had been thinking the same way. He launched a project to link NSW schools with the tsunami-affected schools in Sri Lanka, with the support of the Acting Consul General for Sri Lanka in Sydney, and Central School principal Margie Hayes put Nimbin on the list.

The list itself is impressive. Over 180 Sri Lankan schools were badly damaged or destroyed, and NSW schools were paired up on the basis of enrolments, age and gender balance. Nimbin Central was matched with a school called Thambaddai GTMS in the Akkaraipaddai Zone. The bowling club committee loved the idea, the school's student representative council endorsed the project, and so we had a potential recipient for the funds.

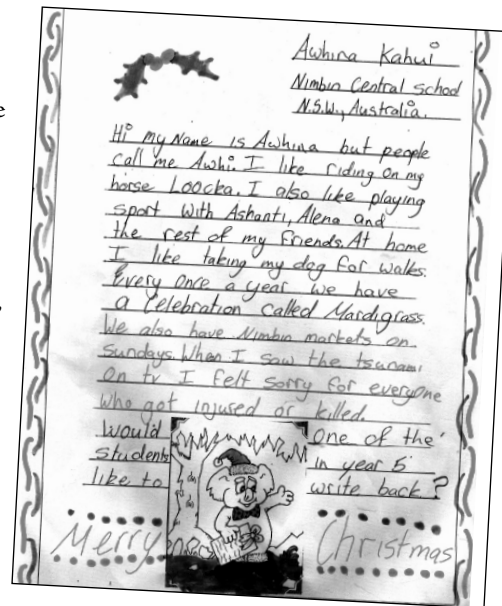
Making contact wasn't easy. The school never had a phone or email anyway, and in the rest of the country communications infrastructure was either swept away or over-stretched. Consular officials genuinely had far more pressing affairs. Even attempts to research the area were uncommonly difficult. Spelling of place-names is not standardised in the Democratic People's Republic of Sri Lanka, (population 20 million), and the village name can also be spelt "Tampaddai" or "Thampaddai."

It turned out to be an east coast fishing village on an inlet, some 20km south of the administrative centre of Akkaraipattu. They lost houses, boats and infrastructure of all kinds, including the school and the main north-south road on which they depended.

The aid agency primarily responsible for rebuilding the school turned out to be Rotary International, through its club, RI Capital City, based in Colombo. Rotary has taken on the reconstruction of 20 schools around Sri Lanka, in its "Schools Re-Awaken" project, and celebrated the opening of its first rebuilt school on 5th December.

At Thambaddai, progress has been slow but steady. By 31st March, students had been relocated to temporary shelters away from the site of the new school, the rubble was cleared away and the architects, estimators, contractors, bureaucrats and aid agency people got the plans ready. The project manager's log notes, "The foundation stone was laid on 19th August, and construction work commenced on 25th August."

Unfortunately, in October, work was "temporarily halted due to clarification required



regarding structural design of part of building," but by December, "Foundation work complete up to DPC level on all admin, classroom and library blocks," at a cost so far of 7,062,882.7 Sri Lankan rupees, (\$92,000 Australian).

The Rotary club president, Mr Supem de Silva, in consultation with the school principal, Mr Paranjothi, suggested that our donation be used to help provide furniture for the new school. Everyone agreed at our end, and the direct transfer of funds was arranged in December.

Before term ended at Nimbin Central school, students in both the primary and secondary departments wrote pen-pal letters to the students at Thambaddai expressing seasonal greetings. In this way our students can become



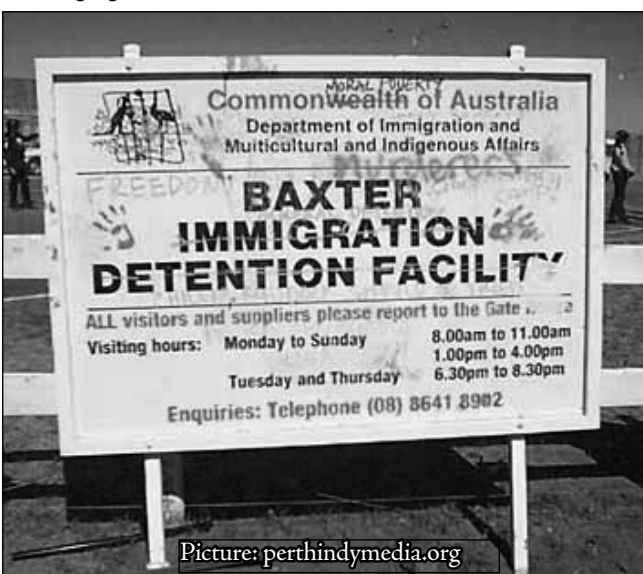
Thambaddai: One of the letters sent by Nimbin (top) All that remained after the tsunami; classes have been held in these temporary shelters all year.

personally involved in assisting to provide support for one particular school. The students at our school will also benefit, as it will help them better understand the impact of the tsunami on the lives of similar young people in Sri Lanka.

A fat package of letters has been trusted to the Sri Lankan postal system, which according to Supem de Silva now "works at snail speed, especially in the Eastern Province." They should have them by the start of their new term.

Bowling Club president John Ryan said, "We are a small community, and this is a small thing that we are doing to support another small community on the Indian Ocean rim."

A further fund-raising event will be held at the Bowling Club this Australia Day, on Thursday January 26th from 12 noon to 3pm. As well as music and dance performances, there will be corner-to-corner bowls and raffles. Further information about Thambaddai, the reconstruction, and our new pen pals will also be on display.



Picture: perthindymedia.org

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