

Mercy Advocacy

“She gave birth to her son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn.”

- Luke 2:7



Seeding the Future with Others

December 2014

Christmas is a time for coming together in family - and especially for rejoicing in the youngest members. As our Government proposes ever harsher policies for asylum seekers who are often separated from family both here or offshore, and as the efforts to impose secrecy continue, the voices of some of the detained still somehow manage to reach sections of our media. A mother of a not yet three-year old has written a very powerful letter published in The Saturday Paper conveying what is happening to her family and others on Nauru. Despite our continuing duty of care, the Immigration Minister sheets all responsibility for what is occurring on Manus and Nauru to the local authorities.

At this time we await, too, the outcome of the appeal on behalf of baby Ferouz, who although born in the Mater, has been issued with no birth certificate and is currently condemned to statelessness as a 'transitory person'. As with many others born in Australia, he is under threat of being returned with his family to Nauru. Our voices can be joined to all those now being raised, including several of our leaders from the arts, sport, business and the community who are campaigning to urge that "we can be better than this."

Measures are now afoot, too, to close all pathways from Indonesia to Australia for those seeking protection with the entry of even UNHCR determined refugees disallowed. Where will these now find hope?



Open letter: Living in the hell called Nauru

I am writing as a mother in Nauru house of detention. After 10 months of being detained on Christmas Island, my three-member family was brought here: myself and my husband and my son who is not yet three. As I knew we were going to be forcefully taken to Nauru, I felt sadness and spent all the night crying in misery. Any time I looked into face of my son, I asked myself, what is his sin to be punished harshly like this? What wrong we have done to receive such treatment? Just as I heard an officer saying that we were going to be transferred to Nauru, I suddenly felt all the miseries in the world. I kept crying all the time we were leaving.

We were put in isolation on Christmas Island. They checked us for nearly 10 hours with no break – they kept searching our bags and threw half of our items away. We were not allowed to wear shoes. They did not let us to tie our hair. They



checked behind ears, inside nose, beneath tongue and hair. Big bully officers. My little son was scared and kept crying.

Do you know what the meaning of hopeless and helpless is? Do you know what is the meaning of I got tired of being alive?

After 10 hours of inspection, we were put into a bus accompanied by a large number of officers and then onto an airplane. The journey took eight hours. My son neither ate nor slept for 24 hours. You may not believe that my son really didn't sleep for 24 hours, but he felt such anxiety. During this journey, everybody who wanted to use the toilet was accompanied by three officers. They never allowed the doors to be closed.

At last we reached a hell called "Nauru". They checked us for the next six hours. Then they created files for us all, and we were transferred one by one to our new home.

There are near 100 tents here, which are mainly of plastic and sack. Inside each has been divided into six, seven or eight rooms, depending on the size of families who are supposed to be settling. There is nothing to mean "privacy". Our part is much like a stable – it has never resembled a home. Even breathing or murmuring of the next family can be heard. Rooms have no real doors, except a piece of sack.

Children cannot go out to play because it is very hot here. I am sure you can never imagine how deadly is the situation we are experiencing. Children enjoy playing, singing and imitating voices of animals and trains. Here in Nauru, children are never allowed to be children: I wonder if you can believe that children, my two-year-old, have been scolded for just speaking loudly or crying, or even playing? I keep saying to my son "Hush. Be quiet." Sometimes I think he has gone mad for the limitations I am imposing on him. I burst into tears for having frightened him and spend all the night crying.

Anger and depression is evident in children's faces. My son tends to beat other children from the very time we have moved to here. He has unrest at nights. He wakes up 10 to 15 times a night and I need to keep his mouth closed. Most of the nights he suffers nightmares. My son is in crazy age, and this situation will make him a man devoid of self-confidence, angry and timid. The situation we are experiencing here is interfering with the natural process that he needs to spend. I ask you: what is the sin of these innocent children?

Sun shines very sharply and fiercely here from the early morning up to 6 or 7pm and there is no proper place for us to protect ourselves. I think you can imagine



how these four-, five- or six-year-olds suffer from hot weather. Toilets are far away, nearly 120 metres. Most of the children begin to suffer nocturnal enuresis [bedwetting] as a result of the harsh situation and the facilities they are facing.

The “mess” is also far away. Inside there is no cooling system. The quality of foods is very awful. Every day I am concerned if I can feed my son today. I can feed him only three foods a week: rice and chicken and noodle, as well as bread and butter. He actually escapes from food because he has been exhausted of the repeated tastes. My son is now spending 14 months in custody.

Nobody is allowed to take the food outside the “mess”. Sometimes I need to hide a piece of butter in my hat or pockets to take it for my son, just as thieves. Nobody can eat in “mess” because it is very hot here and it is impossible to bring children to “mess” for meal. Besides, children do not eat in crowded places, instead they prefer to play. This has become a trouble for parents. If the officer detects that you are taking food outside the “mess”, you must be prepared for a day-long hunger.

Most of the time, yoghurts, compotes and fruit juices that are given here are outdated. Sometimes, you face mould when you open their lids. Weeks ago, my son infected with diarrhoea for the outdated yoghurt.

We visited the doctor but he prescribed no drugs. Instead we were taken to a steel conex, which is composed of eight rooms. They gave us one of the rooms in which there were a bed and a small table. There was no privacy because doors and windows were nets. The door carried a label: “isolated”. They told us “you are not allowed to leave here until your son gets better”. I ask: how can you keep a two-year-old in a room without locks, privacy and drugs? Whenever my son got out, an officer followed him ordering him to get back inside. He treated my son as if he were 20 years old. I urged the officer to give us books and toys to help me keep him inside. But they kept telling me “we have nothing to give you”. My son kept crying and begging me to let him go out, and I kept telling him “no”. Shortly after that, I burst into tears. I was surprised to see that my son then gave up begging and crying and just came and kissed me trying to make me calm. Why a small boy must frequently see his mother’s crying so much? Why he must receive such harsh punishment?

We spent 24 deadly hours in that room, with no help, as if we had been forgotten. At last we had no choice but to pretend that our son was getting better to be allowed to return to camp. From then on, nobody dared to visited doctor for diarrhoea. Whenever my son saw that room, even from far distance, he started to shout out and cry, because he thought I was going to take him there. I have



recently noticed he bites his nails. What can be the cause but the deadly living situation here?

We have also a shortage of water. Total time you are given for bath is two minutes. When water shortage becomes pressing, you are given one minute. When this time is over, an officer immediately cuts the water off and you have to come out at any situation you may be.

In the area devoted to children less than four years old, there is one bathroom with six sinks. No bathroom here has warm water. You need to rely on cold water. Since the sinks are made of wood, their surrounding is full of worm and fungus as a result of the contact of water. There is such little water, and multiple usage of “wet wipe” instead has resulted in children’s skin burning. One time, my son had burnt so severely that he could not walk.

Drinking water is hardly found here. Sometimes we can find no water even for taking pills. You need to wait until a meal time. Toilets are very dirty because they are cleaned only once a week. Sometimes, recycle bins are full and remain for several days. Unlike what is claimed, here we have no health standard. A traffic of mice and poisonous millipedes has become normal in our camp. It is full of flies.

Individuals who have been locked in this situation are in very dangerous psychological circumstances. They spend much of their time crying. Everybody is depressed and attention for suicide is increasing. Every time a frustrated and depressed person tries suicide, officers prevent it and take that person to visit a psychologist and watch them for several days. If you tell your psychologist that you wish to die they appoint two officers to watch you, one on one. Why? To save you!

Here in this hell live 60 children who are less than four years of age. A number of them are between four and 10, and another 60 or 70 are adolescents. I ask you what is the sin of these children? Australian government should adopt proper actions to block sea passages – instead they are using us to do that. This is not detention, this is hell.

Here seems to be like a military place and even many officers feel that. They feel they have been dispatched to here for armed war. When I talk to them, many have been in Iraq and Afghanistan war. I ask you what is the sin of those who have fled war and dictatorship?

In Nauru all detainees had hope to catch a bright future after all the horrible experiences and unbearable difficulties, and hope they will be released and can



live in a developed country with adequate standards of living, not in such a country like Cambodia or Nauru.

Do you know how many people tried to kill themselves in last few days?

Do you know how many enormous officers have been transferred to Nauru to suppress any kind of demonstration?

Do you know what the meaning of hopeless and helpless is?

Do you know what is the meaning of I got tired of being alive?

This letter is a small picture of the great hell that we are experiencing in Nauru. When we were in Christmas Island we had contacted Australian human rights authorities several times via phone or internet. They kept telling us that we could do nothing because we can never prevent you from being transferred to Nauru. After we were moved to Nauru, we lost all contact with them. Now I ask you, where are the human rights authorities, UN, Red Cross, and humanity? Why they have abandoned us here? Where else may a refugee be treated like this? It has become a surprise for my son to watch TV, to see a bicycle, ordinary people passing by, cars, streets, etc. He is in hell for 14 months. The only thing he has already seen in his lifetime is officers in uniforms.

Please read my letter carefully and try to understand our pains here. We need help, help and help.

I, as a mother, am writing to all Australian people, who I have heard to be kind and friendly. I address you friendly people only, and have no hope in official organisations and authorities. I beg you help us and our little children before it is too late.

This article was first published in the print edition of **The Saturday Paper** on Oct 25, 2014 as "**Living in the hell called Nauru**".



The following two letters to the editor (The Saturday Paper, 1 November 2014) are in response to the open letter:

The sins of our minister

This mother's account of conditions in Nauru was both a terrible letter to read, and a very important one to see in print ("Living in the hell called Nauru", October 25-31). As she says, the letter is "a small picture of the great hell" and this hell is a place that has a veracity because of the detail and the language used. Each paragraph puts us right into the environment that Scott Morrison's policy has created: in practice, nothing short of a series of torture chambers from which there is no escape. Even suicide is stopped by the allocation of a personal torturer to watch you day and night. Humiliation after deprivation is described in this straightforward, heartfelt narrative that has credence in a way that a journalist's words cannot always have. I am grateful that *The Saturday Paper* has published this account. What have we done as a young country founded on migration to believe that this is good policy well executed, and effective because of its damage to human life? "What is the sin of these children?" the mother asks. No matter whether we have religious conviction, or secular beliefs, this woman speaks to us all, and we cannot but be affected. The question is, will Scott Morrison act to change the systemic series of physical and psychological tortures that policy has manufactured. Advance Australia Fair? I don't think so.

Dr Charles Zuber, Dutton Park, Qld

Port Arthur meets Devil's Island

After reading this letter I sat for some time appalled and deeply ashamed. The writer in her simple, direct style told a story as eloquently and as vividly as any Dickens or Solzhenitsyn. I grew up in Australia at the height of the Cold War. Our politicians and diplomats and legal paragons were pleased to tell everyone who would listen – and everyone else – that our system of justice was so moral, so ethical that of course we would let the guilty go free rather than unjustly punish the innocent. Our bubble sure popped years ago, didn't it? What have we now? A blend of Port Arthur and Devil's Island, a concentration camp seemingly designed to persecute its inmates first into insanity and then into death. What on earth has come over us? What has happened to our compassion, our charity, our instinct for a fair go? The government tells us that the terrifying boats are being turned back. Maybe, but at what cost in human life and suffering?

Walter Steensby, Hawker, ACT



*Let us keep our hearts open this Christmas for all families of the world,
both those delighting in love and peace and those riven by sorrow.
God bless us, every one.*



**Compiled by Genevieve Caffery and Dolores Creevey
on behalf of the Members of the Reference Group**

