

Media Release: 20 January 2016
Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites
Asylum Seeker Children as “Political Pawns”: Immigration Minister Threatens To Return Children to Unsafe Conditions on Nauru

The Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, has threatened to send 72 children who have been resident in Australia back to immigration detention in Nauru. Conditions in the offshore black site have been condemned by a number of key organisations. The 2015 United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment reported: “[Australia] has violated the right of asylum seekers, including children, to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.”

An asylum seeker mother evidences the unlivable conditions of life in the camp: “Every day counting time! Ok today might be my turn to be transferred back to hell by the name of Nauru! In my nightmares, walking around the detention centre under 50 degrees centigrade hot weather on sharp hot stones, living in hot plastic tents like an oven without having any air conditioner, looking forward to seeing a cold bottle of water, or even having a good shower not for yourself even, just for little kids full of heat rash on their skins. Having sleep, if you can, in a mouldy situation full of bugs, cockroaches, mice and spiders. Above all no security and safety even inside the detention center.”

A mother, known as ‘Anaa,’ whose child was born in Australia, speaks of the fear that this threatened move has instilled in her heart: “Why do we have to suffer like this? I only live for this child here. What do we have to pay for this painful life we live every day, not knowing what will happen to us and our children?”

Dr Helen Driscoll, Consultant Child Psychiatrist, underscores the manner in which the children’s welfare is trumped by political agendas: “I have been making numerous psychiatric assessments of children and families in onshore detention who have been on Nauru and in custody for 3 years. They are extremely traumatised as are their parents. Clinical imperatives and human rights are subjugated to political agendas. IHMS decisions are subjugated to the veto of Immigration and political agendas. It is an utter disgrace, the impact of which will have life-long traumatic psychological sequelae.”

Brenna Thompson, an early childhood educator who is a regular visitor at MITA, outlines the trauma that asylum seeker children detained in Nauru experience: “Any childhood professional who meets children who have been detained in offshore processing centres quickly recognises the signs of long term, sustained and inescapable trauma. The children I have met and come to know show signs and behaviours that, if I saw in any other environment I would be professionally obligated to report under mandatory reporting laws. These children, however, fall under federal jurisdiction and are therefore unable to be protected by state based child protection authorities. They are pawns of our government with no one to protect them. The children I have met in MITA who have been detained on Nauru show classic signs of trauma and abuse, such as irrational behaviour, mood swings, depression, bed wetting, extreme and irrational fears, sleep disturbances, night terrors and high anxiety.”

Sue Saltmarsh, Associate Professor of Education Studies, calls into question the double standard of exposing asylum seeker children to risks and dangers that would incur criminal proceedings in the Australian context: “Educators and parents who fail to adequately protect children from harm or who knowingly expose them to danger are subject to investigation and criminal proceedings. How is it, then, that any responsible adult should consider, let alone threaten, to knowingly return already vulnerable asylum seeker children to conditions in Nauru where their safety – and that of their siblings and parents – is at risk, and where their protection cannot be guaranteed?”

The conditions of children in immigration detention violate a number of the key elements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia has signed and ratified.

“We owe a duty of care to children detained in Australian run and funded detention facilities, both on and off shore. We owe them protection, freedom and safety.” Brenna Thompson

RAPBS calls on the Australian Government to put an immediate halt to any proposed plans to return the 72 children back to the unsafe conditions on Nauru.

RAPBS media contacts: Janet Galbraith 0418 399 646