

**20 June 2007**

## **International Coalition on the Detention of Asylum Seekers, Migrants and Refugees**

### **World Refugee Day 2007**

#### **Children not counted just don't count**

Numerous studies have documented the psychological harm - such as depression, disruptive conduct, nightmares, and even impaired cognitive development - caused to children in immigration detention. Last December, the International Coalition on the Detention of Asylum Seekers, Migrants and Refugees (IDC) contacted its member organisations to try to understand the situation of children in immigration detention.

“We have tried to find out how many children are being held in immigration detention, but this information is either withheld or just not collected. Either way the end result is the same. If children are not counted, then they just do not figure in policy discussions. We should not be surprised to find children locked up and denied basic services like education. Until this information is publicly available, children will continue to be forgotten,” said Melanie Teff, co-coordinator of the IDC.

On World Refugee Day, 20 June, the IDC has drawn up preliminary findings based on information provided by organisations in 23 countries. IDC members in only three countries – Australia, Canada and the UK -- reported that their governments provided comprehensive statistics on the number of children held in immigration detention. All but three - Ireland, Hungary and Spain - detain children on the basis of their immigration status.

Particularly worrying, in at least eight countries, there are no statutory limits to the amount of time children can be held in immigration detention. Of the organisations able to secure more detailed information, 10 reported that children are either being denied access to education services or the services provided were inadequate. Moreover, information sent to the IDC from members in Malaysia and Mexico raised worrying issues of mistreatment and extreme lack of basic services such as healthcare.

IDC is also worried by the lack of holistic age determination procedures in at least six countries. Children in Hungary, Ireland, and Austria can be detained if immigration personnel believe they look over 18. According to the UK Refugee Council at least half of the 4,000 children seen by their Children's Panel were involved in a dispute over their age and this figure has risen each year.

However, the survey does highlight a few positive changes in immigration detention practices around the world. In particular, the IDC welcomes the introduction of legislation in Hungary last year which prohibits the detention of children on the basis of their immigration status. A South African court ruling in 2004 prohibited the detention of unaccompanied children. Steps forward in other countries, such as Australia and Belgium, were unfortunately accompanied by either inaction or backward measures.

After removing children from detention centres in mainland Australia, the government has swiftly moved to re-establish refugee determination procedures on outlying island states, outside the judicial control of national courts. It is unclear how the rights of children held in these circumstances will be upheld. In Belgium, the law was changed to

prohibit detention of unaccompanied children. However, some still remain in detention and children with parents continue to be detained.

The IDC urges governments to respect the rights of all children as laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It reminds governments that they have a specific duty towards the care of children within their jurisdictions and that they are obliged to seek alternatives to detention, such as child-friendly reception centres and foster family placement.

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**Notes to editors**

The IDC is a coalition of over 100 non-governmental groups and individuals working in over 50 countries the world providing legal, social and other services, carrying out research and reporting, and doing advocacy and policy work on behalf of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers who have come together to share information and to promote greater respect for the human rights of detainees.

The IDC advocates limiting the use of, seeking alternatives to, and using the least restrictive forms of, immigration detention.

The steering committee of the IDC brings together a number of leading international NGOs which share concerns about the treatment of immigration detainees, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, World Council of Churches, and a number of national NGOs.

**List of countries surveyed**

Belgium, Finland, Denmark, Hungary, Germany, Spain, Austria, Ireland, Poland, Netherlands, Malta, UK, South Africa, Egypt, Thailand, Japan, Cambodia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, USA and Mexico.