



Open letter to Prime Minister Scott Morrison - It's Time to Free Them

22 December 2020

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister of Australia
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

Re: Asylum Seekers and Refugees

This year many Australians have had the experience of living with restrictions, unable to go where they want, when they want. We have been deprived of liberty, and many of us have been uncomfortable with that; some have resented it; some have protested about it. We have all been delighted when these restrictions have been lifted. Many States are now enjoying the freedoms that COVID-19 containment had brought.

There were definite, well-articulated reasons for these restrictions and we knew they had a purpose and were time-limited. We agreed with them and cooperated.

In Australia and on islands off-shore there are other people who continue to live with total restrictions on their liberty. They have been doing it for years. They are unsure of the real reasons for their detention. Their incarceration is indefinite; there is no end in sight. They are not criminals; they only wanted a better life for themselves and their families. It is a human right not to be arbitrarily detained and the Australian Government has obligations under numerous international treaties it has ratified to uphold and advocate for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees under Australia's jurisdiction. These treaties include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention against Torture and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

If we, freedom-loving Australians, found our time-limited quarantines or lock-downs challenging, how much more difficult must these people in detention find it? We have had a small taste of what they have experienced intensely, every day for many years, with the average period of immigration detention currently 581 days, and continue to experience into the foreseeable future.

Currently, New South Wales is experiencing a surge in their number of COVID-19 cases. Whilst hospitality venues and places of public worship in Greater Sydney have been capped at 300 patrons, Villawood Immigration Detention Centre currently holds 429 individuals. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission's recently released *Inspections of Australia's immigration detention facilities 2019 Report*, overcrowding in some Immigration Detention facilities with dormitory-style accommodation and communal bedrooms, toilet, and shower facilities have been shown to increase the risk of spreading the virus, with some

facilities operating over their operational capacity. Many people in immigration detention have pre-existing conditions that could put them at a higher risk of severe illness if they contracted COVID-19. Further, these conditions place staff who work at immigration detention facilities at risk of also contracting the virus and through their movements, potentially spreading it to the broader Australian community.

We are approaching Christmas, which is supposed to be a time of peace and goodwill for all.

It is time for the Australian Government to release the asylum seekers and refugees who have been incarcerated for years. There is no purpose to their imprisonment. They are suffering needlessly.

Now is the time. Give them some mercy this Christmas – please.

Yours faithfully,



Peter Carroll FMS
President



Anne Walker
National Executive Director