

# Minister's Statement on Victims of Torture

On 26 June, Craig Knowles, the NSW Minister for Health, was asked a question in Parliament about the services provided to victims of torture in New South Wales. Here is his reply.

It may interest honourable members to note that today is the United Nations International Day of Support for Victims of Torture. Right round the world today, places of assembly, including the United Nations General Assembly, are formally recognising torture as the most extreme violation of human rights and human dignity. Today we stress our abhorrence at the fact that the United Nations receives reports on acts of torture from more than 60 countries each year as well as evidence of government-sanctioned torture ranging from 100 to 130 countries. All nations have a responsibility to speak out and say "No" to torture and help to eradicate these evil practices.

I am proud to say that New South Wales is recognised as having one of the world's leading programs for assisting and rehabilitating victims of torture. I have spoken in this place before about the fine work of the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors [STARTTS] which was established to address the growing, but unmet, needs of traumatised refugees, particularly those who have been tortured as part of their ordeal. In recent years the number of people in detention in Australia has increased significantly owing to unauthorised boat arrivals of people largely from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. The vast majority of those who have arrived have been detained and eventually have been found to be refugees. This, of course, is not surprising, given the terror that they have had to deal with in their countries of origin.

Afghans and Iraqis are fleeing two of the most persecutory regimes in the world, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. The Taliban in Afghanistan has systematically violated the human rights of women through denying them education and the

right to work. Most people who arrive in Australia are from the ethnically and religiously distinct Hazara Shiite minority who have been ruthlessly pursued by the Taliban.

In March 2001 Amnesty International released a report on the massacre of Hazaras by the Taliban. During August 1998, in just three days 2,000 Hazaras were murdered. With increasing arrivals in this country, the number of children in detention also has risen dramatically. Over the course of 2000, 500 children were held in detention for some parts of that year. An example of a child who is currently receiving help from STARTTS is a 12-year-old boy who was taken to the Woomera Detention Centre after being shipwrecked on Christmas Island. The child survived a kidnapping, persecution, trauma and forced separation from his mother, father and four younger sisters. As a Sabeen Baptist living in a hostile religious environment in Iraq, this young boy escaped with his family following his father's torture and arrest.

For the past 11 months, this child has received no schooling. He witnessed his uncle being locked into a caravan hotbox, kept awake all night and forced to endure searing heat during the day. It is interesting to note that, in common with approximately 80 per cent of asylum seekers in detention centres around Australia, this young boy and his extended family eventually were found to be genuine refugees and were granted temporary protection visas. As might have been expected, the counsellors from STARTTS found a very traumatised 12-year-old who was suffering from depression and anxiety. He had constant nightmares and gross eating disorders. STARTTS, with its highly skilled individuals, has begun to help him to rebuild his life. The STARTTS professionals have worked with the

child to restore his physical health, address psychological problems and help him to re-establish communication with his mother.

As I said, last year there were 500 children in detention centres in Australia-children in circumstances not terribly dissimilar to those experienced by this individual-but this is a typical story of the daily work of the men and women who make up the STARTTS team and the thousands of individuals and families they serve, that is, families who originated from more than 50 nationalities but who now call Australia home. As is well known, STARTTS was the lead agency in providing torture and trauma alleviation services to the Kosovars and East Timorese as part of Operation Safe Haven-a great honour in international terms and a great tribute to the dedication and professionalism of the STARTTS team. It is therefore entirely appropriate on this special day-on this international day-that I announce an additional \$600,000 for STARTTS to increase its annual recurrent funding to \$2.1 million per annum for the provision of vital services.

The additional funding will establish a clinic especially for children who have been the victims of torture and trauma, employ an additional staff specialist psychiatrist to support external consultant psychiatrists and expand current counselling services. I am sure that I speak for everyone in this Parliament and in the broader community when I express gratitude for the work undertaken by the STARTTS team. Today's announcement from the Government is a show of our support and compassion for genuine refugees. It recognises that, as a nation, we are more than willing to do what we can to assist those who are less fortunate and those who have been subjected to the terror and degradation of torture. ■