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Refugee Transitions exists to report on a wide range of refugee and human rights issues of relevance to the work of the members of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma; to focus attention on the impact of organised violence and human rights abuses on health; to provide ideas on intervention models to address the health and social needs of refugees; to debate and campaign for changes necessary to assist, empower and strengthen refugee communities in their settlement process and ultimately bring together a vehicle for cultural and personal expression.

PO Box 203, Fairfield NSW 2165
Ph: 02 9794 1900 Fax: 02 9794 1910

EDITORIAL
Olga Yoldi and Peter Williamson.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS
Jorge Aroche, Jenny Queen, Helena Janson, Robert Semeniuk, Nooria Mehraby, Peter Williamson, Sue Roxon, Olga Yoldi, Donald Horne AO, Sarah Daniels, Phuong Au.

PHOTOGRAPHY
Cover photo by Robert Semeniuk

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Michelle O’Reilly

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The views expressed in Refugee Transitions are not necessarily the official views of FASSTT.
Message from the Director

By Jorge Aroche, Executive Director, STARTTS

It’s always exciting writing these introductory messages for Refugee Transitions. Having had some involvement in the initial planning discussions about the content of the next issue, but prudently distanced from the writing and creative processes, it is always fascinating to read the completed articles in order to write this message. This 13th issue is no exception, with a host of thought provoking articles touching on various current issues of significance.

I was particularly impacted by the meaningful simplicity and contemporary relevance of the contribution by Emeritus Professor Donald Horne, who graciously agreed to have one of his recent speeches published in Refugee Transitions. It is not only one of the most refreshing and searching commentaries I have read on diversity, multiculturalism and Australian society, but it is also a call for action to move the debate forward on these issues by redefining and clarifying some of the concepts and words that have characterised such debate.

The main theme for this thirteenth issue of Refugee Transitions is refugee children, and several articles address this topic. Peter Williamson, in his last article before moving to Canada, conveys a poignant personal account of his contact with the children of two families he met at Villawood detention centre. Sarah Daniels offers a similarly stirring depiction of the lives of young mothers in Australian Immigration Detention facilities. Meanwhile, “The Tampa Boys”, an article by Sue Roxon and Yolande Johnson explores the experiences of the 38 Tampa “unaccompanied minors” who were offered asylum by New Zealand, and discusses the intervention and treatment methods used to assist them. Nooria Mehraby’s “Unaccompanied Child Refugees: A Group Experience” concludes this issue’s focus on refugee children with the description and analysis of a group intervention carried out with Hazara Afghan children.

In our forgotten conflicts section, Olga Yoldi once again manages to make intelligible another long standing and extremely complex conflict, accounting for a large number of refugees and internally displaced people; that of Colombia.

All in all, I believe this issue of Refugee Transitions will provide you with lots of interesting and thought provoking reading, extremely pertinent to the trouble times we navigate worldwide.

Our best wishes on behalf of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma for the festive season and the New Year. Have a great 2003, and if you haven’t done so yet, please don’t forget to subscribe to Refugee Transitions.

Jorge Aroche
December 2002
Iran, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Uganda, Angola, Burma, Sierra Leone... the list is much longer than this. In 2002, there are more child soldiers than ever before. They are being sent into battle by helpless parents and brutal dictators. Even the United Kingdom sent sixteen year-olds into battle in the Falklands War. They are brutalised and traumatised, but children are malleable and cheap, and are easily trained to kill. JENNY QUEEN reports on this appalling situation of those who are

UNDER ARMS & UnderAge

“I was a boss. A strong fighter. When the big men were running we small boys stayed behind.”

– Junior Davis, aged 12, Former Liberian Child Soldier

“It’s easier if you catch them young. You can train older men to be soldiers; it’s done in every major war. But you can never get them to believe they like it.”

– Gwynne Dyer, War

Photography by ROBERT SEMENIUK
Tamil LTTE presence in some Sri Lankan schools. One report tells of a playground in which toy guns are mounted on see-saws and pictures of young “martyrs” are prominently displayed. In the face of this kind of heavy militarization, the involvement of entire societies — young children included — in the act of making war is really not out of the ordinary. When armed struggle becomes a part of daily life, children have no choice but to accept it. When violence touches them personally, in the form of the death of a friend or family member, or perhaps by the destruction of their home, they feel helpless and frightened. Involvement in the military is one way to take control of that helplessness. In Liberia, after a brutal government counter-insurgency campaign which left countless children orphaned, human rights workers noted a substantial increase in the numbers of children joining anti-government militias, in an attempt to exact revenge.

In heavily militarized zones, there are also societal pressures on children to join in the struggle. There have been many reports on the pressures young Palestinians face to join in the struggle against Israeli domination. A West Bank psychologist has written that many children become involved in violent acts, such as throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, in order to demonstrate their identification with the group, in essence, “to be one of the guys.” While parents naturally worry for their children’s safety, this behavior is nonetheless supported by the community at large.

On a micro-level, changes in weapons technology have also made it possible to include children in modern warfare. During the earlier part of the 20th century, rifles were heavy, unwieldy and difficult for small children to operate. In recent decades, improvements in small arms technology have yielded lightweight and relatively easy to operate weapons like the M-16 rifle and the AK-47. The unintended effect of these “improvements” is that children can now be made into more effective fighters with comparatively little training. As one human rights worker puts it, “In some places, if you’re as tall as a rifle, you’re old enough to carry one.”

There are, at this moment, more than 300,000 child soldiers in active service in an estimated 41 conflicts around the globe. These are boys and girls ranging in age from seven to seventeen who act as porters, cooks, soldiers and providers of sexual services. They are recruited, they volunteer, they are sold by their families, and they are forcibly pressed into service. The problem is far-reaching and almost impossible to address by remedy of traditional international law.

Child soldiers are nothing new – there are scores of recorded instances of the use of children in historical battles, from the French Revolution to the US Civil War. But changes in the way we make war, in the manufacture of small arms and in global economics has made the problem increasingly common. One Swedish watchdog group, Rädda Barnen, recorded a 16 percent increase in the numbers of child soldiers in just three years, between 1995 and 1998. Perhaps the most pressing question raised by these figures is “Why?”. Why has the latter part of the 20th century seen a world-wide increase in the numbers of child soldiers? And why children at all?

CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF ARMED CONFLICT

“If an entire community or group perceives a risk to its own survival, validation or acceptance of the participation of its children in the struggle will be difficult to resist.” – Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohen, Child Soldiers.

In order to understand the reasons why child soldiers are becoming ever more attractive to military groups, it is helpful to consider some of the political and societal changes of the last century. The end of the Cold War has seen dramatic changes world-wide in the nature of armed conflict. According to Dr Mike Wessels, today’s conflicts are “increasingly internal... ethno-political conflicts, characterized by butchery, violence against women, and atrocities sometimes committed by former neighbors.”

A significant result of this trend is the militarization of daily life for many children around the world. What this means is that, in these militarized zones, children are accustomed to the presence of armed patrols, a visible police force, military leaders in high governmental positions and other intrusions of the military into daily life. A vivid example of this type of intrusion is the
WHY CHILDREN?

"These fighters make more disciplined, brave, and... nationalistic soldiers. They make the best fighters." – A Burmese Shan MTA commander, on his preference for child soldiers.

Even if we accept that the nature of warfare has changed, that conflicts tend to be less government-driven and often involve the whole of the community, we are still left wondering why children? How can it be worth it to end innocence and sacrifice the future? Certainly the Goodwin-Gill assertion holds some truth: a community unable to see a future, fighting for its very existence, will use any means available. But there are other causative factors that make children very attractive targets.

Economic factors play a huge role in explaining why so many societies sacrifice their youngest members to warfare. The states and regimes which use child combatants are among the poorest in the world. Simply put, there are not enough resources to go around. In many societies, children are more economically expendable than adults. The recent global shift away from agrarian economies has made large families less of a financial asset. Adding to the problem, in nearly every region where child soldiers are used, internal conflict has resulted in economic devastation. As a result, traditional industries in which children have participated economically (such as light agricultural work or craft labor) have been slowed or halted. Under such circumstances, children are less valuable to their families and communities, and are placed at a greater risk of becoming combatants.

While forced recruitment is certainly a problem in child-soldiering scenarios, many children choose to join military groups of their own will, largely for financial reasons. There are reports of Liberian children as young as seven who joined the government AFL forces because, as one Red Cross worker put it, “those with guns could eat.”

Some children join voluntarily, others are sold by their families. While it is true that a child may contribute to the family income, when pressed, many families agree to sell their children for economic compensation. In other cases, families may pressure children to join the military in order to contribute more directly to the household income. It is a matter of simple, but chilling calculation: if a child costs his family more than he can bring in as a soldier, he is at risk.
Across the board, children from wealthier families are less at risk of becoming child soldiers. Wealthy families are often required to buy their children out of service, or send them away from home to avoid forced recruitment, but they are spared the fate of poorer families. According to one report, when LTTE violence broke out in Sri Lanka in 1987, families with the available means sent their children away from militarized zones. In response, LTTE rulers decreed that no male between the ages of 15 and 35 could leave LTTE strongholds without first purchasing an “exit pass,” costing up to $300,000 rupees (about $3800 Australian). As a result, poorer families were forced to surrender their sons to a brutal paramilitary group to ensure their own survival.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking cause for children’s attractiveness to military regimes is their psychological malleability. They are obedient, eager to please and more vulnerable than adults to political propaganda. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian military leaders used children to clear mine-fields in advance of the army. A report by the Center on War and Children records that these children were “armed with headbands with religious slogans and khaki jackets bearing the message that they have the ‘permission’ of the imam to enter heaven, along with keys on chains around their necks ensuring such entry.”

It is no secret that children are more susceptible than adults to coercion, intimidation and old-fashioned behavioral conditioning. They are also

![Gun culture: Somali street kids control the streets of Mogadishu in the service of war lords.](image)
enticed by the excitement of battle. In the same report, one Liberian human rights worker says he was “convinced that the bulk of 9 and 10 year-olds in the NPFL’s Small Boy Units joined for the ‘Rambo-esque’ adventure of it.” For many military commanders, it is this enthusiasm which makes children ideal recruits.

In his controversial book, *On Killing*, US Lieutenant Dave Grossman explores the reasons behind the military’s preference for young recruits. He argues that adult soldiers have an aversion to killing, even in combat scenarios. This aversion cannot be conditioned out of adult recruits, but research in combat psychology suggests that younger soldiers are less likely to avoid killing when subjected to conditioning techniques like those currently used in the US military’s basic training. As a support for this theory, he cites firing rates between the Second World War and Vietnam. In WWII, the firing rate (or the percentage of available soldiers who were firing their weapons) was between 15 and 20 percent. When this figure was released, the army moved to address the problem by instituting training programs designed to inure recruits to violence. As a result, the firing rate in Vietnam was close to 95 percent. Grossman offers an additional reason for this dramatic increase: the soldiers in Vietnam were, on average, the youngest ever in an American war.

If American basic training techniques can be described as desensitizing, in many of the regions where child soldiering is practiced, it is nothing short of dehumanizing. Many military leaders force children to learn by doing, which often means repeatedly exposing them to violence to numb their reactions. One report describes the Colombian paramilitary practice of forcing children to cut the throats of domestic animals and drink their blood. Another details the story of a 14 year-old boy who had once fought for the anti-government RENAMO forces: “I was told to train. I would run, do head-over-heels, and climb trees. Then they trained me to take guns apart and put them back together again for four months. Every day the same thing. When it was over they did a test. They put someone in front of me to kill. I killed.” This is a heart-rending example of the ease with which children’s resistance to violence can be overcome.

Once the transition from child to soldier is completed, the military organization gains what Sri Lankans refer to as “human tigers,” remorseless young killers. The child, however, loses the very essence of his childhood – innocence, compassion, a place in the social order. This is one of the greatest tragedies of the problem of child soldiers. Often reintegration is impossible because the children’s families are frightened to have proven killers in their homes. In cases where female soldiers have been sexually assaulted, they may find that their communities treat them with suspicion, and that they have no prospects for marriage. Even in the best-case scenario, a re-integrated child soldier is
likely to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome and have difficulty returning to his or her old life.

There are so many disparate factors contributing to the problem of child soldier that it is impossible to point to any one major cause. However, there are a few clear facts. Child soldiering today is almost entirely confined to developing nations. Poverty, political instability and a lack of future prospects all lead to the use of children in armed conflict.

The majority of conflicts involving child soldiers take place between government and rebel factions or between two or more non-governmental armed groups. These groups see themselves in dire circumstances, without a guaranteed future. Their immediate survival is threatened, and they find it necessary to utilize all available resources. Unlike most developed nations, they can see no long-term benefit to investing in their children because they cannot guarantee their ultimate survival. Thus, the use of child soldiers becomes advantageous, and even necessary. Unfortunately, the non-governmental status of most groups that use child soldiers makes international intervention much more complicated. Because non-state actors cannot be bound to inter-state treaties, international law do very little to address the problem.

**“Despite all recent attempts by the international community, today more children bear arms than ever before.”**

INTERNATIONAL LAW AND OTHER REMEDIES

One of the more contentious issues in international law as it pertains to children is the age of majority. At what age does a child become an adult? While most Western governments set the age of majority at 18, in many cultures the age that signifies the transition between childhood and adulthood is much younger.

Traditionally, international human rights treaties have placed the age of majority at 15. Both Additional Protocols I and II (1977) of the Geneva Conventions set the definition of a child as “[those] who have not attained the age of fifteen.” In 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child set the definition of the age of majority at 18. Currently, all nations represented at the UN have signed the Convention, with the very notable exceptions the United States and Somalia.

Unfortunately, the Convention did not stipulate that children under the age of 18 are not to be used as combatants.

In May 2000, The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Its main provisions hold that

- children under the age of 18 may not take an active part in hostilities;
- children may not be drafted into the armed forces;
- steps be taken to ensure that children who voluntarily join the armed forces are actually voluntarily joining, and that their parents grant informed consent;
- and states take action to prevent non-state armed groups from recruiting children for an active role in hostilities.

Despite the noble aims of international law, the fact remains that many of the children who are most at risk by the practice of child soldiering have no realistic means of protection. International law is widely known to be impotent in terms of deterrence. As we have seen in a wide variety of cases, from the issue of Iraqi arms inspections to Australia’s handling of refugees, a nation’s status as a signatory to international treaties may have little effect on their governance. Because there is no real means of enforcement, international law remains a well-intentioned but highly ineffective remedy to the problem of child soldiering.

As important as international law may be in raising awareness of the plight of child soldiers, the only means by which child soldiering will be halted is by supporting massive infrastructural improvements in communities where there are high instances of the practice. Because poverty plays such a large role in placing children at risk, it is unlikely that the problem of child soldiering can be addressed without some alleviation of economic factors. NGOs and international aid groups must institute aid or economic improvement programs in communities at risk. In addition, community education programs may help illustrate the long-term costs of child soldiering.

The practice of child soldiering is a complex...
Child Soldier
Fact Sheet:

There are more than 300,000 children under the age of 18 serving in government or armed resistance military groups.

Child Soldiers are currently being used in up to 33 on-going armed conflicts around the world.

Both boys and girls are used as child soldiers. According to Human Rights Watch, in their case studies, as many as one-third of child-soldiers were girls. Girls used as child soldiers are often sexually assaulted.

Not all child soldiers are forcibly recruited. Many volunteer for economic or social gain. In some cases, children are sold by their families into armed service.

Children are particularly attractive to armed groups because of their psychological malleability and eagerness to please.

Poor children are at a much greater risk of becoming child soldiers. Refugees and orphans are at a particular risk.

There are few protections for children offered by international law. Where laws and treaties do exist, they are almost impossible to enforce.

WAR Children
a photo essay by Robert Semeniuk
Hundreds of millions of children are growing up in countries undergoing conflict. Apart from those directly drawn into the fighting, millions more are killed or injured by fighting or by the scourge of landmines which continue the war long after the fighting is over.

There are over 11 million landmines buried around the world – most in places unknown and long forgotten by those who laid them.

War disrupts education, food supplies, prevents cultivation of land and access to scarce resources. Millions more die as indirect results of the wars than are killed in the fighting. Most of the world’s refugees are children, in flight from violence.

Some never make it to refugee camps. Most families hope to return home when peace returns. For many, it will never be possible. Some wait for resettlement in third countries such as Australia, but most will never reach the end of the mythical queue.

Others, like millions of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, live illegally outside their own countries – struggling to find work and exploited with meagre wages by bosses who know they can never complain. Many of those working are children, without parents or bringing in food for invalid family members. Many of these children are forced into sex slavery or prostitution.
LEFT: An Afghan boy is learning to use a prosthetic leg after losing his when he trod on a landmine.

Landmines maim tens of thousands of children every year resulting in greatly diminished opportunities for children to complete their education and enter the workforce. The human suffering is immense, yet demining is prohibitively expensive and cannot even keep up with the rate at which new landmines are being laid.

RIGHT: a starving Somali baby is cared for by a sister. Children suffer most from famine, which is usually caused by war.

BELOW: Helping hand: in Kuito, Angola, thousands of children are fed at a feeding centre where workers try to keep them alive throughout the war, which has worn on for over thirty years.
ABOVE:
Palestinian children play “Arabs and Jews”, a children’s game in which they act out their emotional trauma. Some children throw stones, some play Israeli soldiers and others play distraught mothers weeping over the bodies of their slain children.

FACING PAGE:
In a Cambodian hospital with her father who has had his leg and his life shattered by a landmine. His child cannot know the implications of this personal disaster for a family whose breadwinner has lost much of his capacity to work. With no social security, the chances are that they are condemned to poverty.
Shatila – 2002
twenty-five years on

In 1977 thousand Palestinians were massacred by Christian militia in the Shatila refugee camp in southern Lebanon. While the killing was carried out by Lebanese Christian militia, an Israeli government enquiry found General Ariel Sharon to be responsible for the massacre. He is Prime Minister of Israel.

These children who were born in the camp, play in buildings riddled with bullet holes, and know no other environment. The psychological environment is one of violence, militant resistance, stress and despair.

Photos: Robert Semeniuk
At the entrance to Shatila, the rancid stench from garbage piled up for a city block behind the Syrian-run market stalls, makes me gag and vomit up most of my strong morning coffee. I feel like I am entering a slab of concrete 7 stories high with one alleyway through the middle and a thousand narrower passage ways leading to the lives of some estimated 20,000 disenfranchised, war-hardened, suffering and traumatized people. And where all this “disease” erupts is in the hearts and minds of the children who have consumed 54 years of dedication to the Palestinian cause. I was there when the people of Bedawa and Shatila marched in memory of the 54 years that they have lived in these hellholes. One man carries a key to his house in Palestine, and I photograph a child who carries a Palestine Mandate land registration certificate as proof of ownership of the land that was taken away from her family, 54 years ago. “We thought we would only be gone for couple of weeks,” one man tells me.

As Nadia Salameh my 50 year-old-guide explains, “the children here are more ‘Palestinian’ than their parents”. The visual evidence comes from a visit to a kindergarten where the teacher, Amira Baytau, is lucky to have a job. If you don’t work for one of the NGO’s in the camp, or the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, you don’t work because Palestinians are not allowed to work (in 72 jobs and professions) in Lebanon. She is 21, was born in Shatila, and lost her entire family to the war and the massacre in 1982. The children sing songs and hold up a poster they have made. This is one of 5 kindergartens in Shatila, and each one has approximately 100 children. The poster is a painting of the Temple on the Mount in Jerusalem, and on each cloud in the sky is the name for a child in the class and where their home is in Palestine. These are places they have never seen, places many of their parents have never seen, but which they call home and know all about, and they are only 5 years old. “We will be the flowers of Palestine”, says another poster on the wall. “We have the right to speak, to play, and be heard”. I ask 5 year-old Abdu Hadi where he comes from and he tells me Abka in the north of Palestine. Another small child tells me she is from Haifa and another says “Rashid”. Not one says, “Shatila”.

At the UN Relief and Works Agency school where class sizes soar to 50 students per class, Amanda,12, tells me that when she grows up, she wants “to kill Israelis... I want to be a pilot of a war plane... but then there are other pilots that have the right to take their parents on a trips”. Nadia takes me along the narrow dirty alleyways. It is hot and high noon, the only time the sunshine creeps through the slit at the top of a seven story concrete canyon. Out of the big metal door of the kindergarten, I step into
one of the long, narrow, alleyways, all netted together by a web of electric and telephone wires, water pipes and hoses, dripping and hanging and protruding from the graffiti-plastered, often bullet-riddled, suffocating concrete walls.

Water and electricity is patchwork, expensive, more or less illegal, and interrupted on a daily basis. Hezbollah pays for the daily water deliver truck. The confusion of wires speaks loudly for years of re-wiring. And my imagination runs rancid with all the bloody horror that has happened here. The playgrounds are the war-torn buildings. Places of death and memories that never go away. “My grandfather was killed here.” “My mother, my sister, my brother died here.” For every house I visit in Shatila there is another story of death and destruction.

Fatima Mahyoub, was a twenty-year-old mother when the massacre occurred. She remembers an Israeli bomb striking a nearby building. Her husband went outside to see what was happening while she stayed in the house with her children who were 2 and 3 years old at the time. A few minutes later a woman came to her house. “What are you doing, here?” she said. “They are killing people all around” Fatima pushed her son and daughter through a back window, a very small window. “I don’t know how I did it”, she tells me, “It was so small. She just ran, and found herself lost in the narrow alleys, just following running people trying to get away. There was shooting. She ran to the PRCS Gaza Hospital a few blocks away.

Days later she found her husband who had his own tale of the massacre. “When he went back to the house... The military had occupied it.... They asked him about Palestinian fighters and beat him. He thought he was going to die. He had seen many people dead in the alleys”. Her sister and brother-in-law ran to the Kuwaiti Embassy about 4 blocks away. “The Israeli soldiers were all around the stadium.... my sister saw Ariel Sharon talking to a South Lebanese soldier. During the Israeli bombing my sister lost a leg.... her husband is still an invalid from his wounds”. ■
Unaccompanied Child Refugees: A GROUP EXPERIENCE

NOORIA MEHRABY, an Afghan refugee and counsellor with the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, reports on how a group therapy approach was used with unaccompanied and traumatized Afghan child refugees. This is an edited version of an article that recently appeared in Psychotherapy in Australia.

The devastating wars that engulfed Afghanistan for the last twenty-four years have left the country with a mortality rate of 257 per 1000, for children under five. On average, seven children are killed or injured every day by landmines. Ninety percent of Afghan girls and sixty percent of boys are illiterate. Life expectancy for women is 42, the lowest in the world.

The Western world lost interest in Afghanistan at the end of the Russian occupation. Hospitals and schools for Afghan refugees in Pakistan were closed through lack of funding from aid agencies. Afghans were no longer considered ‘refugees’, but ‘displaced persons’. Despite the worsening internal situation in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries, the international intake of Afghan refugees was reduced. Consequently some Afghans came to Australia illegally, paying considerable amounts of money to smugglers in the hope of saving their lives.

Most of these ‘illegal immigrants’ are from the Hazara ethnic group who are predominantly Shiite Muslims, a 16 percent minority in Afghanistan.
The Hazaras have suffered from long-standing discrimination, racism and violation of their human rights by other ethnic groups. Figures from a Human Rights Watch report of August, 1998 on a massacre of 8000 Hazaras in the city of Mazara-shif, and elsewhere, show that they also suffered enormously under the Taliban regime.

The Hazaras come from the working class and the majority of them are illiterate. They were often forced into manual, serving and construction jobs, although their contribution to the construction of Afghanistan is priceless. They were not accepted into the broader Afghan community and, in Australia, other Afghan ethnic groups may still reject them.

Towards the end of 2001, STARTTS arranged to provide such a group intervention in response to a request from Jan Harrison, a school counsellor from Chester Hills High School in Western Sydney. She wanted counseling support for the Afghan students who attended the school. Harrison was aware that the nightly news reports of the American retaliation for the September 11 terrorist attacks were having an impact on the students, so she asked them if they would like to discuss their concerns with someone of their own nationality. They accepted unanimously.

The group consisted of fourteen children aged between 12 and 21. Culturally, an unmarried 21-year-old Afghan girl is considered unaccompanied. The group comprised three girls and eleven boys. Three children from one family had permanent visas and were living with their parents, but the rest were unaccompanied minors who had arrived in Australia by boat. They had been detained in detention centres for between two to eight months before being granted three-year Temporary Protection Visas and then released from detention. All were severely traumatized in their country of origin and in their efforts to become residents of Australia.

When STARTTS was approached, only eight weeks remained of the school year. Given this, we decided to conduct a short-term group intervention consisting of five two-hour weekly sessions. There was also a follow up session after the school holidays. STARTTS also agreed to provide individual therapy if this was needed. Given the intensity of the trauma suffered by the children, and that only a short-term intervention would be possible, it was decided that emotional exploration would be limited.

In thinking about the groups we were guided by Judith Herman’s model of trauma and recovery. According to Herman the first stage is the creation of a safe and trusting environment, the second stage is the exploration of the traumatic experiences, and the third stage is social reconnection. Since this workshop was conceived of as a time limited intervention with the specific goal to explore the impact and flow-on of the terrorist attacks, only restricted exploratory work was possible. The participants would have the opportunity to vent their feelings, express their thoughts, share their experiences and normalize their symptoms. We also aimed to strengthen relationships and to develop a support network. The therapeutic interventions would consist of expressive techniques such as art therapy, story writing and some music therapy.

Three workers were involved in facilitating this group. I was selected as the active facilitator; being Afghan I understood the clients’ culture, history and language, and I had trained in facilitating groups. Jan Harrison, the school counsellor was included. We hoped that this would facilitate her future counselling relationship with the students and role of case coordinator in making referrals and planning educational pathways. Fatana Rahimi, an Afghan STARTTS bicultural counsellor, was the third member. Her role was as a support counsellor in the group, and she could be available if a participant needed individual attention over and above what was possible in the group. For example if a participant became so overwhelmed and chose to leave the room, Fatana could attend to them. Since she was not running the group yet spoke the language, her capacity to observe the process was enhanced.

Although I was the main group facilitator, the participation of the other two workers and their contribution and support to parts of the group process was essential. The debriefing after each session was helpful in sharing our feelings and thoughts and enabled us to maintain our roles in the group.
THE FIRST SESSION

During the first session about my experience as a refugee from Afghanistan, I decided I would share some of my personal experiences in an effort to encourage the children to talk about themselves. I also thought it might help them to see that I was with them, not against them. Because of their low level of literacy I used very simple Dari in speaking to them. I talked about how I escaped from Afghanistan and paid a smuggler to get me out of the country. Escaping to neighbouring countries is often the only option for the majority of Afghans, and smugglers are chosen for their knowledge of travelling routes and their ability to interact between the government and opposition groups.

The two other workers also introduced themselves, and then each of the participants briefly introduced themselves. They stated which part of Afghanistan they came from, their age, their length of time in Australia and the length of time each had spent in the Intensive English Centre. With the exception of two Tajik brothers from the city of Herat, everyone referred to themselves as Hazaras. I saw this as reflecting their loss of identity as Afghans; members of this ethnic group always identify themselves primarily as Hazaras rather than as of Afghan nationality.

Participants and facilitators sat around the table. Each child was asked to throw a small ball to another participant and ask them a general interest question such as what was a favourite hobby. I started the game by throwing the ball to one of the participants and asking him about his interests. He responded that he was interested in playing cricket and threw the ball to the next person. Each participant spoke about different things such as music and sports. When the ball was thrown to a seventeen-year-old girl she said, “I like my mother more than any thing else in the world”, then burst into tears, prompting her twenty-one-year-old sister to start crying, too. I remained silent for a while, in order to validate their feelings and give them time to process them.

There is a fine balance between enabling the participants to express their feelings, and retraumatizing them by giving those painful feelings too much space. Prolonged silence might also disturb the continuation of the session. Soon I tapped the girls on their shoulders and the game was continued. The ball was thrown again and this time one of the boys said, “I like the food that my mum cooks the most.” Another said, “I like the fruit of Afghanistan, here in Australia fruit doesn’t have the same taste.” Despite the sadness and pain in the group, it was inappropriate to explore the trauma too deeply so we kept the group moving with supportive statements and humour.

In the second part of the game I asked them what they did not like. Not wanting to refer so soon to a serious topic like war, I started by saying that I did not like cloudy weather. Despite this, all the participants responded that they hated war and they hated the Taliban. This was a clear indication of both their suffering and of the rapid development of trust amongst themselves and the facilitators.

An issue arose with regard to the establishment of group rules. It soon became evident that the children had little experience of how rules could be empowering for them rather than destructive. When they were asked what kind of reactions, behaviour and attitudes they would not like during and after the sessions they looked confused. Initially they found it difficult to believe this empowerment. I had to give them an example by using the issue of group confidentiality. For instance, if I cry during the session I would like this to be kept within the group and I don’t like people from outside to know about this. This was also an indirect way of saying that is was okay to cry. After this example, the children spontaneously brainstormed several issues such as confidentiality, listening to each other, speaking up, respecting feelings, no put-downs, no blaming, being polite and the right to pass. It was also discussed that we had to respect differences among us.

Before the group, the facilitators developed a number of group processes aimed at developing trust and exploring feelings, but our planned ice-breaking artwork was not needed as the young people responded positively to the opportunity to tell their stories and to share their fears, concerns and hopes.

EXPLORATION

Given the fact that the group was very open and the sense
of trust was high, I decided to move into talking about the war in Afghanistan. I was mindful of several concerns. Many of the children may not have had access to television or radio and may not have a full picture of what was going on in their country of origin. I also told them that if they did not want to share their feelings and thoughts it was okay. I used the word ‘we’ to give them the sense of us all belonging to the Afghan community, rather than they just belonging to the alienated Hazaras minority.

I began by saying that I was upset when I heard the news about the war in Afghanistan, and the two other workers also said that they too were sad about what was happening in Afghanistan. A sixteen-year-old boy responded by saying “I hate war and I am very worried about my family. I do not know if they are dead or alive. I am very sad and upset.” He looked very upset but trying hard to control his emotions.

Then a fourteen-year-old boy said, “I am very sad and I am very worried about my family…” He could not complete his sentence and started to cry. He left the circle and went to the window, too embarrassed to stay in the group. I had to decide whether to leave him for a while or to encourage him back to the group. I also wondered whether I should leave the decision to the group members about how to support their friend.

At this moment another 13-year-old boy started crying. I went to the first boy and tapped him on his shoulder and told him it is okay to cry, and asked if he would like to join the group or whether he would like to go out for a while. The boy decided to rejoin the group. By the time he sat back down nearly everyone was in tears. This was an extremely sad and powerful moment. It was difficult for me to separate my professional role as a counsellor and my personal feelings of sadness of being a part of a traumatized community. I am also a mother of three children of similar ages to the participants. However, I managed to contain the session, control my own emotions, and remain attentive to the participants.

With the exception of a 14-year-old boy, everybody spoke about their feelings and expressed their emotions. He, however, did not want to share his feelings and said that he was strong enough not to cry. This could have reflected his feeling of responsibility for his two older sisters who were in the group. He might also have been ashamed that his sisters were among the first to break into tears. The main concern the participants raised was whether their parents were being caught between the ‘war against terrorism’ alliance and the Taliban regime. They all said they hated the war and the Taliban and were extremely worried about whether their families were alive or dead. They had had no contact with them since they had left home. Although they did not speak directly about feelings of survivor guilt, it could be read into some of their statements. One said, “My parents sold all of their belongings to save my life. I am wondering who would have helped them to get out of the war zone.”

To conclude the session we brought a number of scarves and I asked each of the participants to pick a scarf and say how it related to their feelings. I started by picking a blue scarf and I said, “I have chosen this scarf because it is blue and blue stands for peace and I like peace”. One child picked a green scarf and said he chose it because it represented Islam. A 13-year-old boy chose a red scarf and said “I have chosen this scarf because it is red and red represents blood and I have not seen anything else but blood during my life.” A 16-year-old boy picked up a scarf that had a design on it that looked like a chain and said, “I have chosen this scarf because it is like a chain and I feel I have been tied with a chain during all of my life.” An 17-year-old girl chose a flowery scarf and said, “I have chosen this scarf because it reminds me of my mother who was wearing a scarf like this”.

A 14-year-old boy picked up a colourful scarf and said, “I like this scarf because it looks like the colour of trees in my country”.

At the end the participants were asked to hold hands with the people on either side of them and make a chain. I said that this circle indicated the strength and unity of the group and that though some chains may hold them down others can help make them strong.

Because of the intensity of the session and the level of emotion involved, I suggested that the group might like to finish the session by singing a song. They said they would, but it was not an enthusiastic reply. During an earlier exercise two
brothers had said that they liked singing songs. I asked if they would like to sing a song and the rest of the group said they would like to hear them sing. It took them a while to decide but eventually the older brother started singing. They sang a most powerful song about being away from one’s homeland.

At the end of the session the participants thanked me very politely, saying that they felt relieved that even in a strange country there were people who care. I was painfully aware of my own feelings of loss, sadness, anger and resentment. I could sense the fresh smell of my homeland from this group who had arrived more recently. I also had feelings of guilt as I am from an ethnic group that has perpetrated human rights violations on the Hazaras.

My feelings of mothering them were bounded by professional boundaries. It was an extremely emotional session, which reached an intensity that I had not experienced before in my counselling career. As soon as the participants left the room, the other two facilitators and I burst into tears. I believe this was a normal human response. I felt that I had travelled with this group on a journey of years within two hours, and felt exhausted. I felt the exhaustion on my shoulders and tiredness in my feet. What astonished me were the strengths of these children and their ability to survive. Walking side by side with them on their journey enabled me to learn so much from their strength and I was left to wonder how much I had helped.

SUBSEQUENT SESSIONS

The subsequent sessions were similarly characterised by a high level of participation and emotional expression. The second session followed the children’s journeys from their homes in Afghanistan through intermediate countries of asylum, boat trips and detention centres to their current destination in Sydney. The stories described treacherous journeys with people smugglers from opposing ethnic groups often linked to the Taliban. Ninety percent of group members said that at some point they had thought that they would die.

The next two sessions aimed at normalizing their symptoms, helping them to understand the process of dealing with loss and grief, making new connections and creating a new identity. At the closure of both these sessions the children said that by sharing their experiences they felt that they were not alone in trauma. In addition, since this was a religious group they all asserted that Allah would help them and gained strength from this belief. Having a belief in some omnipotent being appears to be helpful when so much of their life has been full of hopefulness and despair.

The Eid celebration, which marks the end of Ramadan, coincided with the final session. This party ends the thirty day fast that celebrates atonement and re-connection with Allah and one’s fellows. This seemed a fitting end to the group. There was singing and dancing, small presents were given to each child through donations given to STARTTS, addresses and contact numbers were exchanged and free activities circulated for the holidays.

This was a new experience for them – that an ending can be happy rather than sad.

Nooria Mehraby graduated as a medical doctor from Kabul University in 1983. She worked as a lecturer at Kabul University and as a general practitioner until 1987 when she and her family were forced to flee to Pakistan. She worked as a doctor in various refugee camps and taught medicine at a women’s university in Peshawar for five years. In 1993 she and her family arrived in Australia and since 1995 she has been a bicultural counsellor with the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors. She recently completed a Master of Counselling from the University of Western Sydney.
The first anniversary of the Tampa incident has passed without official acknowledgment from the government. Their refusal to let several hundred asylum seekers, rescued from drowning, disembark onto Australian soil, saw the beginning of the so-called Pacific Solution. New Zealand offered to take 131 of the asylum seekers waiting for processing in Nauru. Amongst this group were 38 ‘unaccompanied minors’.

The Tampa Boys

SUE ROXON spoke to Yolande Johnson, physiotherapist at the Refugee Survivors Centre (RAS) in Auckland for the story of what happened to these boys when they first arrived in Auckland.

Upon arrival at Auckland in early October 2001 all asylum seekers were taken to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, which became a temporary detention Centre. They attended a six-week cultural orientation program that included English lessons, medical and mental health screening, treatment, and processing of applications for residency before moving into the community. The Tampa arrivals, who doubled the number of arrivals normally processed at the centre, took three months to process.

“When the asylum seekers arrived, they were very relieved and immensely grateful to us for welcoming them, but they were also highly traumatised.” Yolande said. “Many were confused and didn’t know what country they had actually landed in. But of all the horrific experiences that had led to their flight from Afghanistan, the journey on the boats was foremost in their minds. They all said that their experience with the Australian navy vessel HMAS Manoora had been dreadful. They were the most traumatised group of arrivals the centre received in the two years Yolande has been working there, and “every intake of refugees from the ‘Pacific Solution’ has been similar to this first group,” she said.

The asylum seekers were initially assessed by the mental health team and divided into stress
assesssment groups. These groups, which were developed as psycho-education groups, allowed a space for the sharing of information about stress and about RAS, and for trust and rapport to develop among the participants. It also gave the group leaders a chance to find out what further help asylum seekers needed and identify individuals at risk of self-harm and in need of individual intervention. Out of these initial groups, one women’s craft group was formed, which eventually became a psychotherapy group, once trust was formed. Group activities were used as a therapeutic medium to build trust among women.

The Stress Assessment groups, which were split between men and women, began with a large body outline drawn on the whiteboard and each participant was invited to describe their individual symptoms, each of which was marked on the chart. This exercise, in the normalising of post traumatic stress symptoms, always generated a lot of laughter as the unfortunate figure on the board began looking like a cartoon character who had stuck its finger in a light socket, with colours, lines and squiggles bursting out from all over its body. The tone of the groups was deliberately kept light and humorous, and the groups carefully finished with relaxing diaphragmatic breathing to avoid leaving participants in a state of emotional arousal.

After the chart exercise revealed the commonality, as well as the extent, of their symptoms, each participant was asked to identify and share their own individual ways of coping with their symptoms and stress levels. This step increased participants’ understanding of each other as well as creating connections. “People who coped by being alone were better understood and their need to be by themselves was respected, and people who liked walking discovered each other and began walking together.” The group leaders also suggested various non-drug stress management techniques and their suggestions were also discussed and tried on the spot,” Yolande said.

Yolande, an ex-dancer and body therapist, aimed to make the groups’ activities as physical as possible. She developed an exercise and dance group for those women who responded positively to this approach. This group was so successful with Middle Eastern women that news of it travelled the Pacific, and Yolande discovered that women still waiting in Nauru were being contacted by the women at Mangere and told to make sure that they got ‘that blonde woman’ when they arrived at the Centre!

Her emphasis on physical exercise also appealed to the unaccompanied boys, who had been placed in their own assessment group. These boys, all Farsi speaking, from Afghanistan, and aged between 14 and 17 years, had mostly formed a natural group on the boats, and Yolande found them to be very expressive and forthcoming when talking about themselves, their feelings and experiences. “Although they had started playing soccer as soon as they arrived, they were all highly traumatised, and all missing their mums. Some even said they were missing hugs and cuddles,” according to Yolande. She felt that the boys’ need for touch and contact was an overwhelming one, and she decided to address this by offering them to form a massage and self care group. It met weekly, for two hours, over a period of six to eight weeks. They were also invited to participate in a weekly talk group, an exercise group, and all were receiving individual counselling. This was in addition to attending school from 9 am to 3 pm.

“Because I was planning to teach massage techniques, the fact that I was a woman was a potential problem, so at first I used my partner, Lasse, who is also a body therapist at RAS, as my model. The boys knew he was my partner - this was important to establish safety. The next time the group met, however, Lasse wasn’t available, and so I asked for a volunteer from the group. Each time I had the group, a different boy volunteered without prompting! When they felt comfortable I invited the model to practise on me. I would help the group individually, guiding their hands with mine to correct the techniques, each time asking permission to touch them first.”

The boys worked on each other while sitting down, as this was a safer and more empowering position than lying down. They would start with diaphragmatic, relaxing breathing. They practised finding acupressure points on each other’s heads and necks. Yolande also taught them how to hold the head of someone in distress, with one hand on the forehead and another on the back of the head, in order to help them relax. The boys learned how to have “listening hands” – hands that ‘be’ rather than ‘do’. They learned how to listen to what the body is saying through hands, which are ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’. This is one of the principles of BodySense therapy, Yolande felt that in order to look after each other as well as themselves, the boys needed to understand how feelings are expressed by the body, and to learn to listen to another’s feelings, as expressed through their bodies, while differentiating these feelings from their own.
These concepts underpin Yolande’s own work as a BodySense therapist and teacher, and are highly sophisticated ones and she said the boys loved learning about bodies in this way. “They loved the idea that bodies tell a story as surely as words do, and that we can learn to read this story. They really took to body awareness exercises and were always eager for new techniques.” The majority of boys were so keen that they chose to continue the group through Ramadan.

They learned how to massage each other’s neck and shoulders, and the art of foot and hand massage. Later they practised massaging each other’s backs. “There was lots of giggling and ticklishness to start with but this lessened with time as they felt safer and became more relaxed and comfortable.”

“The group provided also an opportunity to chat about what was concerning them at the time - the inadequacy of the food during Ramadan, and jobs and careers, and their futures. They all wanted to be physios! In Afghanistan, of course, 15 and 16-year-old boys are starting to shoulder the responsibility for supporting their families.”

Over the duration of the group, the boys reported feeling ‘lighter’ and that their aches and pains and headaches disappeared. Yolande attributes this to both the touch, and to the relief of their fears and anxieties. She says they became more trusting and felt safer, as well as feeling more empowered through the knowledge and understanding they had gained. They became more confident and relaxed.

After being granted residency they left the camp and the boys - except for one whose application for residency was rejected - became the responsibility of the Child, Youth and Family Department. With the exception of two boys, the others now live together in a hostel with hostel parents, and go to school in the community. One boy, who lives with his sister, joins the others on weekends at the hostel. Their care has shifted to school counselors as their problems became oriented towards their present lives rather than related to their traumatic experiences and issues of cultural adjustment.

Their social worker thinks they are a complete success story, happy and well-adjusted teenage boys - well adjusted to Kiwi teenage culture, that is! Since the NZ government has decided to use some of their Humanitarian Entrants quota to reunite families, the boys’ parents may be arriving in 2003. Yolande says with a laugh, “We are expecting a rush of referrals when the parents arrive”. Watch this space to see what happens! ■
After expressing concern about the welfare of children being held by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, PETER WILLIAMSON was invited by friends of detainees to the Villawood Detention Centre.

Afnan Al Abadey is seven years old. She attends second grade at a school down the road from where she lives in Sydney’s western suburbs. When I first met Afnan, she had been at her new school for just a few weeks.

Afnan has made one school friend so far, and hopes to make many more. Every morning two men drop her at school, and at 3pm they pick her up. She must not be late, and must go straight back home. She will not be able to visit her friend’s house, or play with others after school. If a friend should want to visit her, she would have to go through the elaborate procedure of gaining access to the Villawood Detention Centre.

Weekends for Afnan are spent behind the razor wire of a perimeter fence encircling the area in which she can play. She has been incarcerated for half her life. She has no memory of her earlier life outside a razor wire fence. Unfortunately, those times were none too happy, either, as her parents were fleeing persecution in Iraq.

Afnan’s older brothers have also recently been allowed to go to school. Their flight and subsequent detention has cost them years in lost schooling – a loss they will never make up. Nevertheless, a family friend says the lines of worry and anger on one brother’s face have disappeared since recently being allowed five days a week to pass through the detention centre’s gates and go to school like every Australian child his age.

Unlike every Australian child, he now looks forward to Mondays when he can be free, and hates the boredom of the weekends behind the wires.

To be a child in an Australian detention centre is to live a life so abnormal that one can only speculate on the psychological consequences. Childhood, anywhere in the world, ought to be a time free of cares and full of finding one’s place in the world. It is a time of expanding boundaries, but this cannot be done if one’s boundaries are
those of what is effectively a concentration camp.

While Afnan is growing up in detention, Veronika has been detained less than a month when we meet. She is still too bewildered at what has happened to her for me to discern the emotional impact of her incarceration. She is held in Villawood with her younger sister and her parents who have applied for asylum in Australia.

Vlastimil, her father, tells me the story of how the family was hauled in by the immigration officials when he went to visit DIMIA to notify them of a change of address. He was arrested on the spot as an illegal immigrant. He protested that he was waiting the outcome of the application for asylum, but the officials said that they had rejected his family’s application and that the family had failed to respond to their notices requiring them to contact DIMIA and leave Australia.

With the whole family in detention with her mother and her sister, they had to ask friends to empty their rented house and store their possessions. The family car was left in a car park at Parliament House in Canberra, where Veronika’s mother was making appeals to politicians to intervene in their case. She was arrested in Canberra and the car remained where she had left it.

While DIMIA thought of Vlastimil as “on the run”, he had, in fact, rented a house, started a business, put his children into school, paid his taxes and embarked on becoming Australian. Numerous government agencies had his address and, in any case, on each change of address he had notified DIMIA of the new one.

Veronika was brought into detention a month later. She had a part-time job and was never able to resign. Her year 10 “leaving” exams were just months away, and she asked permission to continue attending school. This was refused. She then asked to have her books brought to her so that she could continue studying in the detention centre. This was also refused. She was told she would not be allowed to write exams at all.

Veronika had a boyfriend, but after one visit to her in Villawood, he dumped her and ceased contact. A few friends visited her, but it was a long way to travel and they had exams coming up.

A few days before we first met, the family was called to an office inside the detention centre, where they were grabbed by security guards, handcuffed and bundled into cars and taken to Sydney Airport. They were dragged onto a plane, literally kicking and screaming, punched and ordered to “shut up”. Not surprisingly, the airline refused to carry them.

Although the Bilsky’s appeals to the Australian courts were not complete, the DIMIA sought to deport them, using force and violence. The family showed me scratches and bruises on their bodies, and spoke of their disbelief that they could be treated in such way in Australia, the country which was their adopted home.

I asked Veronika about her situation. She spoke of her helplessness and her frustration at being unable to complete the last months of the school year and write her leaving exams. Nevertheless, she was confident that it would soon be sorted out and that they could not be deported because the DIMIA accepted that their case was still before an Australian court. She was concerned that if they were ever deported, her younger sister would struggle in the Czech Republic because she could not speak Czech. She had had all of her education in Australia.

Veronika wrote about how she felt about detention, and handed me a handwritten page on our next meeting (see box). I promised to visit again, soon.

The long-term incarceration of asylum-seekers is detrimental and sometimes disastrous for their psychological health. The incarceration of children in such circumstances exceeds all bounds of acceptable treatment and the spirit of the Refugee Convention. It is causing suffering and psychological trauma and it is a national disgrace.

Refugee children are owed a heightened degree of care. Many have suffered hardship and trauma as a result of war, persecution and flight, and still more, after witnessing suicides, riots, violence towards detainees, and people suffering emotional breakdowns, have been traumatised within Australia’s detention centres. Children cannot
distinguish between detention and imprisonment for reasons of criminality. They experience detention centres as prison, and their treatment by uniformed guards, lack of privacy, and regimented lives in an institutional environment, all contribute to the perception of imprisonment.

Some children have complained of being unable to sleep because of continual checks by guards who shine torches into their faces. They sleep many to a room, with some of the younger children sometimes unable to sleep because the older children keep them awake late into the night. Depression, suicidal thoughts and despair are all exacerbated by incarcerating already vulnerable people.

Minister Ruddock has said that detention serves as a deterrent to other asylum seekers who seek to enter Australia without the required papers. Intentionally inflicted psychological pain or suffering on any person for such purposes as coercing third person would contravene the UN Convention against Torture. The routine detention of children is also considered by many to be a violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The administration of Australia’s refugee detention centres does nothing to dispel the perception of imprisonment. Australian Correctional Management is a corporation which runs prisons. Many of the staff were recruited from the prison system. Thus it can hardly be expected that they would treat asylum-seekers much differently from prisoners.

For children the situation is worse. Children are imprisoned in only the most extreme circumstances, usually after extensive efforts to find alternatives within the juvenile justice system. Refugee children, however, are treated much as the most difficult of child offenders, yet they are not there as the result of any offence.

When I visited Villawood two weeks later the guards at the reception desk told me that Veronika was no longer there. I asked where she was and they said that they did not know. I asked what had happened to her and, again, they did not know. The entire Bilsky family was gone.

I have since found out that that after several attempts to deport them, Veronika and her family were drugged and bound and put onto a military aircraft out of Australia. They were taken to Malaysia and sent on a commercial flight via Russia to the Czech Republic. I once asked Vlastimil what he would do if they were deported, and he said that he would have no choice but to flee the Czech Republic again, but he had no idea where he would seek asylum for his family.

Veronika Biliska

I have been in detention now for about a month and they have attempted to deport me twice. When I was outside, everyday I would wake up and go to school and I believed I was living an average life, but now that they have put me in detention it’s all changed. Before, I would see my friends every day; we would talk, we’d go shopping, watching movies – do things any normal teenager would. Now, I’ll see my friends once a week if I’m lucky. I can’t go shopping or watch movies.

I just feel like it’s all a dream, a nightmare which just won’t end and I keep feeling like I am being punished for wanting to be an Australian. All I want is my life back to study and be normal. I have been here for seven years and I have a younger sister who’s just twelve years old.

The first night they took us here I was so scared and upset we were all wondering what was going to happen next. I have never heard of this place before, so being here is quite scary. The fence and wires are very depressing. Even though in time you forget about them, you know they are all around you keeping you a prisoner.
Women behind the Wire

by Sarah Daniels

Alexandrine and Virginia are both young mothers who share an apartment. Unlike other mothers, they cannot meet up at the park or take a stroll with their babies in the pram, as both of them are locked up inside Villawood Detention Centre, without their sons.

Alexandrine, 29, fled Russia fearing for her life. Describing frightening and terrible events in Vladivostok where she was living, she claims to have witnessed a murder in a nightclub there, and subsequently was raped on a number of occasions by the security guards and the local police. She left Russia on a false passport, arriving in Australia in 1997.

Her appeal for political asylum has been refused and in May 2002, while in her local RTA office to pay a parking fine, she was taken away in handcuffs by two Immigration Officers, while her five-month-old son Andrew sat screaming as he watched his mother being dragged off.

“I was standing in a queue. They told me to sit down... I waited five minutes and then two men come and handcuffed me, they grabbed my son from me. They ring the father and take him from me. At that time I was still breast-feeding my son.”

Though Alexandrine had not seen the father for over twelve months and there was no contact with the baby, he has been granted full custodial rights. “His father, Sam was not there for my son, I am the only one who wanted my baby from the beginning.”

Alexandrine has been detained at Villawood, since 24 May 2002, and access to her son depends solely on her ex-partner. “Sometimes he comes, sometimes he doesn’t. I wasn’t seeing Andrew for three weeks, he (the father) was doing it to hurt me”.

The NSW Family Court order has ruled that she can see her son three days a week within the confines of Villawood visiting area. Her requests for overnight access with her son have been refused.

Mark is dropped at the palisade fence while a security guard unlocks the gate, and is handed the baby. The guard carries the baby through the metal cages, and to his mother waiting at the other side. The sight is both pitiful and heartbreaking.

Since her detention, baby Mark has developed acute eczema. He has a very low resistance to allergies and is prone to infections. She believes that his condition has deteriorated both mentally and physically since their separation.

“All throughout the time Mark came to me for visits I have seen his eczema become worse. I kept telling his father to take my son to the doctor, but he just ignores me always. That’s very frustrating for me because by the law, I cannot show my baby to the doctor here in Villawood because he is not a detainee and the doctors here refuse to examine my son”.

Dr Sandy Whitehouse, a paediatric specialist has expressed concerns regarding the responsibility of care of the child. “Alexandrine requested that I examine Mark as he had a rash and it was getting worse”. She had discovered the rash was the herpes simplex virus, diagnosed at Westmead Children’s Hospital and the cream she was given to use, a steroid cream. “Mark has eczema and a steroid cream is suitable for eczema but is absolutely contraindicated in a herpetic condition.” Consequently, his body was covered in painful red sores.

Dr Whitehouse pursued the issue to get appropriate care for the baby, but was shocked to find that Alexandrine has no access to medical care for her son and no access to an advocate for him.

During the handover process when the father arrives to pick him up there is no discussion regarding daily management, his development, diet or health care needs, and no social worker or advocate has been elected for either Mark or Alexandrine.

On 10 October 2002 Justice Chisholm ruled that no order should be made” that would lead the child returning to Russia with the mother. The mother’s evidence about the reasons that she fears for her life in Russia makes this an obvious conclusion”. In other words, Russia is deemed too dangerous for her son to return there with her, but not dangerous enough for Alexandrine to be granted
temporary protection status here in Australia.

Alexandrine’s time is running out. Her appeal to the Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, has been denied. She has been contacted by Immigration who told her that she would be deported. Meanwhile, she has not seen Mark for over a week. His father has broken the agreement with both her and the courts to bring Andrew to the detention centre three days a week. She stands at the fence each day unsure of whether or not she will see her son again.

Virginia, 28, has not seen her four-year-old son for over two years; like Mark, he is also an Australian citizen. She was arrested while leaving Australia with false papers, two months pregnant. Her son lives with her ex-husband and he has refused Virginia any contact. Both Alexandrine and Virginia have no legal rights to their sons and contact remains limited if at all. There is no social worker or advocate for either of these women or their children.

Like all pregnant women that are detained in Villawood, Virginia was driven to a nearby hospital giving birth to her baby daughter Naomi, alone, with only two ACM guards beside her.

“My life in here is hard, really hard, I did not plan it this way at all, I was leaving Australia to start a new life again, I wanted to get my son back and be as far away as I can from my ex husband.”

Both of these women’s situations are desperate and the conditions under which they are living can only be described as horrendous.

Juni Ong the initial founder of Children Out Of Detention (ChilOut) has commented on the situation: “I am aghast at the hypocrisy of our leaders. Australia, over many years, has often preached to the third world and developing nations about their human rights record, but I had never looked at human rights in terms of Australia. I had a very rude awakening when I realised that mandatory detention was a human rights issue, and more importantly, it is a children’s human rights issue, which is even worse in my opinion”.

“To me it is like a creeping cancer where human rights are concerned. It is the final domain; it is the last frontier of an evolving society that then has earned the right to call itself progressive and civilised. Human rights are hard fought for and hard won, and it can be lost in the blink of an eye. Which I believe is where we have arrived. Everything else comes to nought if we turn our back on human rights, especially children’s human rights.”

Both the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, have condemned Australia’s detention centres, likening them to overnight police lock-ups rather than places suitable for the lengthy detention of people who have committed no crime.

As the University of New South Wales Centre for Refugee Research and the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women stated, “Effective parenting cannot occur in an environment where family and parent-child routines such as setting bedtime, normal family mealtimes, and family outings are not possible, and where parents’ ability to provide a safe and supportive environment critical to children’s development is removed”.

“Parents report feeling a lack of control over everyday situations. Even the child’s food is prepared by strangers: this erodes family structure when traditional patterns of food preparation, eating and parental role modelling are replaced by the life of the institution.”

Australia contravenes almost every article of the UN conventions on children and both Alexandrine and Virginia are the human face of this harsh policy, with their children ‘forcibly removed’ and neither one sure of when they will next see their sons. Alexandrine’s words are full of emotion as she describes her situation; “I feel like I am dead. It is like I am killed but I am alive somehow. I just hope one day that I can hold my son again and be with him. I love my son and want to hold him so much”.

Virginia told me;” It is very hard to explain to you how I feel. Which way can I tell you how I feel - he is alive my son, and I cannot see him. Only I can see the life ahead for me without him, hard, very hard. I am angry and tired, this feeling really makes me hate myself”.

As Julian Burnside QC has commented, “In twenty years’ time our children or grandchildren will ask, what did you do to try and change this? Those without an answer will show themselves to be complicit in the great crime of Australia in the twenty-first century”.
A new handbook on refugee resettlement has just been published by UNHCR and the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST), an Australian NGO. Entitled “Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration”, the handbook is intended as a resource to help in the development of sound programs for the integration of resettled refugees.

“We are delighted that this handbook has been published,” said Erika Feller, UNHCR’s Director of International Protection. “Resettlement is a vital durable solution for refugees, but concrete programs are essential to help refugees to integrate in their new countries. That is what this handbook is all about.”

The handbook was written by experts from the VFST, with financial support from the government of Australia. Substantive advice was provided by UNHCR and by a task force consisting of governmental and NGO representatives from a dozen countries. It addresses issues such as initial reception of resettled refugees, ways of preparing receiving communities, language training, education, employment, and the special needs of children.

“The handbook is unique” said Paris Aristotle, Director of the VFST. “It shows how valuable it is to pool the expertise of resettled refugees, resettlement workers, governments and UNHCR.” The handbook, which is written in a user-friendly style, is targeted primarily at program planners. It provides practical examples of “best practices” in various countries. Because refugees themselves are at the centre of the resettlement process, the handbook is interspersed with comments from resettled refugees, reflecting their own experiences.

The production of the handbook was one of the outcomes of the April 2001 International Conference on the Reception and Integration of Resettled Refugees, which was hosted by the Swedish government. The Conference endorsed refugee resettlement and successful integration as important pillars of the international system of refugee protection. But Conference participants noted that there had been little systematic effort to compile examples of “good practice” in refugee resettlement. One idea which gained general support at the Conference was to produce a manual which would allow for experience and good practice to be shared across borders. Ismail Ibrahim, National Refugee Education Coordinator in New Zealand and a resettled refugee, describes the handbook as “a cornerstone in building the capacity of the international community to respond meaningfully to the plight of refugees.”

The handbook is not a “how to” guide, but is intended to be helpful to any government or community which is planning to receive resettled refugees. It will be especially useful for countries or communities considering refugee resettlement for the first time. The handbook also supports the Agenda for Protection - a detailed and wide-ranging set of goals and objectives that will act as a blueprint for improving protection of asylum seekers and refugees worldwide. The Agenda for Protection, which is expected to be endorsed later this week by the 61 governments that sit on UNHCR’s Executive Committee, calls for developing capacity with new resettlement countries and ensuring that resettlement “runs in tandem with a more vigorous integration policy” - goals which are furthered by the handbook.

While UNHCR has long relied on resettlement programs in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, as well as Nordic countries, it has also been working to expand the availability of resettlement by increasing the number of participating countries. Seventeen countries are now involved in the resettlement effort, including newcomers such as Benin, Brazil, Chile, and Ireland.

The handbook is posted in English on UNHCR’s website, www.unhcr.ch under Protecting Refugees, Legal Protection, Resettlement.

French and Spanish versions of the handbook are under preparation.
Since September 11 the US has shifted its policy from fighting drugs to battling subversives. But Colombia is rapidly descending into a civil war and a US intervention, some critics say, could only lead to the “Vietnamisation” of the whole Amazon region. OLGA YOLDI writes.
ick and tired of violence and disenchanted by four years of failed negotiations, Colombians gave Alvaro Uribe a resounding victory in last August’s elections. But on the day he was sworn in as the new President of Colombia, the guerrillas welcomed him by firing mortars at the presidential palace, signaling the start of a more intensive period in the 50-year-old conflict.

Political violence is nothing new in Colombia. In 1958 the United States sent a CIA team to evaluate the situation in that country, where, over ten years a low intensity conflict known as La Violencia had brought more than 200,000 deaths. The CIA agents said that the country, due to social inequality, widespread lawlessness, poverty and the absence of state authority in rural areas, risked “genocide and chaos.” Although the agents doubted that the local elite would do anything to improve the situation, the CIA team recommended a number of nation building measures to the US Secretary of State and Colombian President Alberto Lleras. Washington agreed to assist Bogota to reform its justice system, implement land reform and eliminate guerrilla insurgency.

Only some security recommendations were implemented however, and the conflict never really ended. It became perpetuated and part of the Colombian reality. Today, thanks to a persistent social inequality, a guerrilla insurgency and an ineffective government, a large-scale war over drugs and oil is being fought with the assistance of the US.

Uribe, a lawyer educated at Oxford and Harvard, former mayor and governor, whose father was killed by the rebels, and who has himself survived four assassination attempts, swept into office on a hard line platform. The president promised Colombians to take the war to the guerrillas with an expanded military campaign and restore “democratic security”. At the same time the Bush administration asked Congress to allow Colombia for the first time to use military hardware, intelligence and training to combat guerrilla groups and its paramilitaries as well.

Stopping these rebels will not be easy. Colombia’s new President faces three opponents: an 18,000 member insurgent group, called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym FARC); a 12,000 member right wing paramilitary umbrella group, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC) and a smaller leftist insurgency, the National Liberation Army (ELN), that boasts 5,000 men.

The FARC, founded in 1964, is America’s oldest and most powerful insurgency. According to historian David Bushnell, the FARC originated as an outgrowth of self defense forces established during La Violencia in the communist rural enclaves. Its supreme leader was the legendary Tirofijo, a man who was pronounced dead more than once but always reappeared. From its original stronghold in the Upper Magdalena Valley, the FARC eventually gained control of other parts of the country, where it served as protector of peasants. Today the FARC continues to control large rural areas traditionally neglected by the state.

“We represent those Colombians that have carried on their shoulders the weight of an entire history of marginalisation and violence in their land, because of social inequality and economic structural adjustment programs imposed from the outside,” says FARC’s Commander Raul Reyes. The FARC wants to build socialism and become a player in Colombian politics. “In Colombia there are no freedoms for political groups that oppose the ruling system. The politicians do not represent the interest of the Colombian people,” Reyes adds. The FARC sees Alvaro Uribe as a president who will continue privatisation and who will follow faithfully the neoliberal policy directed by Washington and the formulas issued by the International Monetary Fund.

The ELN was inspired by the Cuban revolution of Fidel Castro, who helped it with training and logistics. This armed group, which was founded by a Christian priest whose mission was bringing justice to the poor, has been weakened in the last few years and recently held secret meetings in Havana with Colombian government officials to explore possible peace talks.

Both FARC and ELN target members of the Establishment: mayors, soldiers, politicians and finance themselves through kidnappings and war taxes.

Both groups have been accused of human rights violations and treating civilians brutally, but it is the AUC, whose forces number 10,000, that poses the greatest threat to Colombia. The paramilitaries are loathed and feared by its victims, which include human rights workers, activists, journalists and unionists. The AUC is responsible for at least seventy five per cent of all
human rights violations in Colombia, including massacres of suspected FARC supporters. They have links with the military and tend to act with total impunity. Although paramilitaries have a long history in Colombia, the AUC was formed in the early 1980s, initially as drug protection gangs and then as anti-guerrilla forces. It is the fastest growing military force in the country and aims to take over key areas, sectors of the police and the Congress. It derives most of its own financing from drug lords, wealthy farmers and business interests threatened by the FARC.

All three groups appear on the US State Department’s list of terrorist organisations. According to Colombia’s network RCN, the Justice Department has obtained indictments against several FARC and AUC leaders on drug trafficking charges. While both organisations have acknowledged collecting taxes from coca growers they have denied facilitating the export of cocaine from Colombia.

Surprisingly, in the midst of this chaos and violence, Colombia remains a democracy. “It is a place where democratic practices coexist with the mass murder of many of its citizens, especially outspoken activists and thinkers, and this schizophrenic national life is becoming more and more difficult to sustain,” writes Julia E Sweig in her article “What Kind of War for Colombia?” Colombia is now the world’s homicide capital. Last year 4,000 people were killed and as a result of war about 30,000 people have lost their lives in the last ten years. Colombia has the third highest number of internal refugees in the world: 2 million, (after Angola and Sudan) and 57 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. More than 3,000 Colombians and foreigners were kidnapped in 2001. The FARC and ELN were responsible for sixty percent of the cases and there were similar numbers of civilians who disappeared without trace.

According to a recent Amnesty International report on Colombia, the armed groups were responsible for the arbitrary and deliberate killings of civilians, journalists, indigenous Colombians and politicians. They targeted civilians for opposing their policies or exposing their abuses. Meanwhile 80 per cent of the cocaine consumed in the USA and Europe comes from Colombia.

Because of drugs, paramilitaries, guerrillas and a collapsing state, Colombia’s war is worsening. “A purely military approach to the crisis will not solve the problem, what we need is peace with social justice” says Manuel Diaz, a refugee now living in Australia. “The state will never gain peace through arms. It will never defeat the guerrillas this way, the only outcome will be a blood bath”. Unfortunately, a military approach seems to be the kind of strategy Uribe is pursuing. And Bush with his new resolve to fight terrorism around the world, seems fully determined to accompany Uribe in this journey.

**DRUGS AND TERROR**

Many critics question why should Bush cross the line between counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency, as a strategy, was abandoned after the Reagan years, when he provided support to the Contras against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and involved his government in a brutal campaign against the leftist rebels in El Salvador. However, now Bush seems to be ready to embrace it again. Why the shift? “For one thing, there is now a widespread consensus that drug eradication in Colombia, long the centerpiece of American narcotics policy has failed” Sweig writes.

It has not only failed, but drugs continue to be central to the Colombian civil war. As long as demand for drugs continue to grow in the USA and Europe, Western addicts will continue to provide an endless supply of revenue to the warlords.

According to Political scientist, Hernando Gomez Buendia, there are 40 million drug addicts in the US and western world. “Yet the US anti drug policy has not changed at all since the 1973 Nixon administration.” Raul Reyes says. “Since then the aim has been to destroy the evil at its root and those roots happen to be outside the US borders.” As anti-drug czar, Lee Brown said “It is easier to go to the hive than to catch the bees as they fly over the US.” Easier and less traumatic for a society used to solving its problems outside the US borders.

However the US government hasn’t always had a clear narcotics policy. As Colombian journalist and researcher, Alonso Salazar points out, “the US tolerated heroine traffic in the Golden Triangle in Asia when the funds became handy to fight communist guerrillas in Vietnam and CIA agent, Oliver North, traded with cocaine to finance the activities of the Contras in Nicaragua.”

But with millions of drug addicts, the US has
now taken a hard line on drugs and in an effort to eradicate coca production the US sprayed toxic herbicides, known as *Fusarium Oxisporum fungus*, over 500,000 hectares of coca crops. This proved to be disastrous; not only did the fungus destroy the coca, but it also contaminated the land, the water, destroyed food products and caused health damage to residents living near plantations. It is ironic that since fumigation coca production has increased. The spraying has rendered much land unusable, causing hunger and displacement. Since crop substitution failed and no development alternatives were offered, families were forced to migrate to other areas of the Amazons only to plant coca again. According to the *Washington Post*, this year the US has called for 300,000 acres of drug crops to be sprayed, up 30 percent from last year.

But drugs are difficult to fight. It is not only Colombia producing them, they have also returned to Bolivia and Peru and other countries. The UN Narcotics Board states that 12 countries in the world depend on the narcoeconomy and 27 third world countries participate in drug trafficking. According to Gomez Buendia, there are hundreds of laboratories in the US and Europe, and 20 million people make a living from drug trafficking in the US, an industry that generates $600,000 million per year that circulate in the international financial system. A study conducted by Noam Chomsky found that most of the money, however, remains in the US. It is estimated that only $4,000 million enter Colombia every year.

The US believes that drug eradication will deprive the armed groups of their power and main funding sources. They have spent more than $2 billion on Colombia since US Congress first approved funds for the controversial Plan Colombia in 2000. The plan made Colombia the third largest recipient of US foreign “aid” after Israel and Egypt.

In addition to providing helicopters, intelligence and other military assistance, Plan Colombia also includes military training. Congress is about to approve $439 million for counternarcotics and development; $35 million to support an anti-kidnapping police effort and $98 million to train a brigade that would protect the Colombian Occidental pipeline, in the department of Arauca, which ELN attacks periodically.

Some of the additional funds such as the $625m Andean Regional Initiative programs can now be used on war, mainly to strengthen the army.

The US congress has been supportive of President Bush’s requests, but critics question his new definition of Colombia civil war as a “terrorist battle”, since neither the FARC nor the ELN pose a direct risk to the US.

**THE QUEST FOR PEACE**

Like Uribe, former Colombian presidents Belisario Betancour and Andres Pastrana led a brave and lonely effort to find a peaceful solution for Colombia. In 1999, in a gesture of good will Pastrana granted the FARC a safe heaven, known as *Zona de Despeje*, and sought assistance from the US for Plan Colombia to address the most pressing challenges (development, judicial reform and coca eradication). Pastrana also requested US support for the peace process, but when the FARC killed three North American nationals they decided not to participate.

An independent commission presented a report to both parties with proposals to agree to a truce, to combat paramilitary forces, and put an end to kidnappings, but talks stalled as government rejected FARC demands. “I repeatedly asked the FARC to define who they are,” Pastrana wrote. “The FARC’s political wing could not sit at the peace table, while its terrorist wing waged war against Colombian society. They are not interested in peace.” He concluded, “peace would do away with their lucrative drug and kidnapping business.”

Negotiations have been difficult because of the mutual distrust both parties have of each other. This is particularly the case after 5,000 people linked with FARC through the Patriotic Union were killed by government death squads during the peace efforts of the 1980s, when the FARC announced its intentions to participate in democratic politics.

Pastrana did not seem to have a clear and defined negotiation strategy, did not launch into any serious reform, and neither did he confront the paramilitaries. However, through a well orchestrated diplomatic effort, he did manage to revitalise US engagement with Colombia that led to a $1.3 billion program that, according to Julia Sweig, was hastily drawn up in English on the back of a napkin on an airplane.

Saving the country from collapse will require Uribe to reinvent Colombia and embark on a
radical reconstruction of the country. Colombia has lost control of half of its territory, forty thousand illegal armed combatants are constantly challenging the social order and government legitimacy has been eroded due to its inability to crush the insurgency or address the country’s social problems. The justice system is in shambles and so exposed to bribery and intimidation that a high percent of crimes are never prosecuted.

The 52,000 professional soldiers that constitute the Colombian army need to be expanded and conscription laws changed. At the moment only young men without high school certificates are obliged to join the army.

Early in his presidency Uribe declared a state of emergency, imposed a new tax on wealthy citizens to help finance the armed forces and launched a Civilian Spies Network. In an effort to deprive the guerrillas of the civilian support they need for supplies, intelligence and logistics, he declared special combat zones in several parts of the country and obliged rural residents of war zones to have travel permits.

“His strategy may be politically appealing,” writes Sweig, “but his plan fails to address the deeper, crippling social and political causes of Colombia’s civil conflict.” Human rights organisations argue that these new measures will be carried out at the expenses of fundamental civil rights.

The most controversial of all these initiatives is the Civilian Spies Network, aimed to assist the under funded intelligence services. Informants will be provided with a mobile phone and will only be paid for tips that lead to arrests or other tangible successes. The guerrilla has already labeled the civilian spies “a network of snitches” meaning that those whose anonymity is compromised can expect to die.

The Network will inevitably drag civilians into the conflict and may lead to an increase in violence. Uribe invented a similar initiative while he was the governor of Antioquia where he helped create the Civil Defence Units to offer protection to civilians in conflict areas where the police never intervened. The units arbitrated local disputes and administered justice as they saw fit. Unfortunately, most of these units began taking the law into their own hands and ended up becoming murderous paramilitaries.

Both the civil defense units and the civilian spy network are controversial simply because civilians are compelled to shoulder responsibilities that belong to the state, leaving them exposed and endangering their lives.

So far Uribe has not requested military assistance in the form of troops from any country. However last July, the Brazilian newspaper Jornal do Brasil, revealed plans to create a UN multinational military force to fight Colombia’s guerrilla groups. Citing the Brazilian Defense Ministry and comments made by Chilean army colonel, Jose Miguel Pizarro, the Jornal do Brasil claimed that Chile’s war academy has been studying a plan since January that calls for 2,600 troops from the US, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador and Peru to intervene in Colombia’s conflict, under the auspices of the UN. Pizarro claims that the intervention could take place in January 2004, after Uribe’s military offensive has placed the country’s leftist rebels on the defensive.

According to the Washington Post, the US has also lobbied unsuccessfully the Organisation of American States to establish requirements that call on the regional body to create a multinational force to intervene wherever democracy is threatened. Last November, Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld revealed plans for a new US proposal for closer coordination between the US, Canada and Latin America in the war on terrorism. “I am not here to press Latin American countries to do anything,” Rumsfeld said at a news conference. “It is up to each country to do what they want to do.” Some Latin American governments however may be skeptical about Washington’s motives.

NEGOTIATING CHANGE

It is unlikely the conflict will be resolved by military means. Defending and rebuilding the Colombian State will require at least a decade long commitment of major diplomatic effort, a massive investment in economic development, humanitarian assistance, as well as a commitment for social and political reform. All these initiatives will mean high financial and political costs that no Colombian government has ever been prepared to assume. Neither have the wealthy and powerful classes been prepared to make any sacrifices. Tax collection up until now only constitutes about 10 percent of the GDP and the defense budget averages 1.35 percent, lower than other countries in conflict in Latin America. The question is how far is the Colombian ruling class prepared to compromise for the sake of peace?

Uribe has announced that he wants to negotiate and has even asked for UN mediation,
however he has narrowed the negotiation agenda to disarmament and re-incorporation of the rebels into Colombian society, terms the FARC will probably reject. The FARC has repeatedly said that both the liberals and conservatives in Colombia have a history of refusing to share political space with anyone else, and, until a change takes place in the political culture negotiations will fail. They said they will begin talks after government troops leave the departments of Caqueta and Putumayo and social and political reforms are included in the agenda. However, the FARC objects to any negotiation between the government and the paramilitaries, since no political status was ever granted to the AUC. This complicates things even further for the government since the AUC has become a powerful force that command 30 percent of support in the Colombian congress.

Before negotiations begin it is imperative that the government provides permanent security throughout the country. At the moment civilians in war zones are facing increasing levels of violence and human rights abuses by all parties of the conflict. According to Peter Romero from the Washington Post, clashes between guerrillas and paramilitaries are rare. “More often than not, both groups move into villages and towns and through informers, seize and execute real or imagined supporters of the opposition ...Violence by one group becomes a powerful recruitment poster for the other.” A humanitarian agreement to keep the civilian population out of the war is needed urgently and needs to be an essential ingredient of any negotiation.

Unless some sort of comprise is reached between all parties soon, it is likely the war will escalate in the coming years. At present the Colombian state would need vast amounts of resources to provide a minimum security throughout the country. Counterinsurgency specialists in the US have stated that to eliminate or weaken rebel groups, the government should be able to provide about 10 soldiers for each guerrilla. This is impossible to carry out with the 52,000 professional soldiers that constitute the Colombian army, therefore vast resources would be needed to increase it and, most importantly, to make the necessary social reforms that will lead to peace.

Although until the late 1990s Colombia had one of the highest growth rates in the region, Uribe has warned that it could move into significant deficit this year. Since he came to power he has made considerable efforts to raise revenue. He is expected to raise $800 million through the new tax imposed on rich citizens. The passing of the Andean Trades Preferences Act could potentially lead to development and employment creation and, the Cano Limon oil pipe protection proposal could also generate $430 million in oil revenue for the government.

Julia Sweig suggests that Uribe could in fact seize the opportunity to enforce the Asset Forfeiture Laws, passed by the government of former President Ernesto Samper, which could allow the government to seize millions of acres in fertile agricultural land from drug lords who purchased them in recent years. “This would allow Uribe to implement a desperately needed land reform.” She writes.

It will be difficult to solve Colombia’s crisis without the cooperation of its neighbours. One of the failures of Plan Colombia was not to involve Latin American governments in its development. At the moment the borders with Brazil, Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador and Peru are vulnerable areas where weapons smuggling, violence, kidnapping and lawlessness are pervasive. Uribe might need to involve regional governments in his peace efforts since the spillover of the conflict has in fact extended to neighbouring countries and may soon be affecting the entire Andean and Amazonian region.

One of Uribe’s characteristics as a leader is his determination to face the challenges: “We will die if we must, but we have to recover peace,” he said in introducing his plan. “If we don’t act with enthusiasm and energy, we just will not succeed.” In his speech delivered during his inauguration as President he made reference to Francisco de Paula Santander and Simon Bolivar, the two founding fathers of the Colombian nation. He described their struggle against colonial domination and their attempts to build a nation based on freedom, unity, equity and social justice. Ironically Bolivar did not live to see his dream come true. At the end of his life, he abandoned his presidency physically ill and worn out by power struggles. He had lived long enough to see the complete disruption of his vision and to utter one final cry of despair: “He who serves the revolution ploughs the sea.”

Let us hope that a different fate will await Alvaro Uribe. ■
Call for Diversity

Emeritus Professor Donald Horne AO is one of Australia’s foremost historians and most respected social commentators. He has written more than twenty books on a wide variety of subjects including The Lucky Country, which was one of the most influential Australian books of the twentieth century.

This is the text of a speech delivered to a forum on race discrimination last October.

A shadow still hangs over contemporary Australia. It has come from the end of the benign liberal-democratic conspiracy not to use xenophobia for political purposes.

From the mid-sixties to the mid-nineties there was a period of growth of a more tolerant and a more liberal Australia. This may now be derided as ‘political correctness’ but we should celebrate as a great collective performance this period of effective political bipartisanship when there was a refusal to use appeals to xenophobia as a way of gaining political advantage. And we must regret its ending.

We must also examine what happened. And in this we should be ready to admit that something more may be needed than simply saying the same old things.

For one thing we should understand that a government can gain from the exploitation of xenophobia indirectly – without itself mouthing one xenophobic word.

The basic idea is that any society has certain basic assumptions and justifications about government and that, as a formula, for better or worse, these assumptions and justifications tend to be defended by a conspiracy within the political class. In a liberal-democratic society what is needed is a liberal-democratic political conspiracy. Like any other politicians, liberal-democratic politicians live by division: they live, partly, on dividing the country. But they also have to know where to stop. Otherwise they threaten the political fabric of the country.

Our political leaders should agree never to exploit xenophobia. But this means more than not using xenophobic speech directly. It also means they should always speak out against any xenophobic outbreak (including those that shriek for a season on talkback radio). They must not exploit xenophobia by strategic silences (standing by significantly saying nothing when prejudices are blaring out).

In fighting xenophobia don’t blame ‘the people’. Xenophobia is usually most virulent when it is supported from the top, whether directly, or by just standing by. It may be that general tolerance is only skin deep. But it is the job of a liberal-democratic political class to keep it that way, so that our private xenophobias do not roll up into a hurricane of threat, as they did last year. Political leaders should recognise that this is not something that can be simply left to the free market of ideas. Not only must they always speak out against any xenophobic outbreak. They must also, in effect, support it by saying nothing when prejudices are blaring out. As a Latin motto says Qui tacet consentire videtur. He that is silent is seen to consent.

As to speaking out? Remember the burning down of a mosque in Brisbane last year at the time of all the calls for mob violence against the ‘ragheads’ during the Tampa election? Do you also remember how Peter Beattie went out to the mosque and condemned its destruction? Just imagine what a different kind of Australia we could have felt last year – more like the Australia defined in the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony – if all of our national political leaders had taken a morning off from the election and stood there amongst the smoking ruins and had affirmed how, although issues might divide them, they were all united in their contempt for the enemies of tolerance within Australia.

On the assumption that something more may be needed than simply saying the same old things, we may also need a clean-
up of a few key words … On my list I have ‘equality’, ‘democracy’, ‘racism’, ‘diversity’, ‘multicultural’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘national identity’

EQUALITY has always been a threatening and authoritarian word in Australia, as well as a source of liberal and humane hope. Its hope is there in civic rights, civil rights, anti-discrimination measures, a concern with equality of opportunity and a skill in the social relations of equality. Its virulence as an authoritarian threat can come from sullen envy and resentful hatred of difference. Over the last few years we have had those who are envious of people on the dole, even envious of Indigenous people as a new kind of privileged class. Perhaps there will soon be a movement demanding, in the name of the fair go, equal access for all Australians to night refuges and soup kitchens.

DEMOCRACY. We should try to understand that our kind of democracy is supposed to be liberal democracy, hedged in with many protections against the power of the state and against what Walt Whitman once called ‘the never-ending audacity of elected persons’. It is not supposed to be straight majority rule, indifferent to minorities. Even less, is it supposed to be mob rule as reflected in talk back shows.

RACISM. I think we should confine the word ‘racism’ to special prejudices about colour of skin, shape of nose, nature of inner eye fold, hair crinkliness, pads of fat over the cheekbones, crinkliness of hair with which are associated various cultural prejudices. If we describe all xenophobia as ‘racist’ we lose this special meaning. When we think of xenophobia we should be thinking of fears and/or hatreds based on strangeness – mainly the strangeness of race (in my sense), and/or religion, and/or nationality, and/or ethnicity. For the moment it may be more religion (viz Islam) than the others. Religion was obvious enough in the long decades of the division between Catholics and Protestants. For that reason the cosy term ‘Anglo-Celtic’ should be excised not only because it is muddled and historically senseless but also because it conceals how deep that division was and therefore deprives us of the story of how that division was healed. We might also excise ‘Judeo-Christian’ as a description of our society – historically it’s false and, in any case, Greco-Roman might be a more useful idea. A more accurate one would be Max Weber’s ‘legal rational’.

DIVERSITY. We should be careful not to flash the word ‘diversity’ around thoughtlessly – as if every form of diversity was good. Having half a million or so organised fascists would make Australia a more diverse society. But it might also finish it off. Nor should we use the word ‘diversity’ as if it means only ethnic diversity. Australia has many other manifestations of diversity than the ethnicity of its immigrants. In fact this usage does the cause of tolerance no good at all. In the overall cause of tolerance we should place more emphasis on pluralist approaches to society in which all kinds of diversities and differences in institutions, opinion and ways of life are seen as inevitable. Being an ‘ethnic’ is only one of many ways of being different.

MULTICULTURAL. It’s a good idea to distinguish between Australian policies of multiculturalism and descriptions of Australia as a multicultural society. Australian policies of multiculturalism are distinctive and they should be discussed. Once they are discussed people can discover that they are mainly about a principled non-discrimination in immigration policy, about helping immigrants find a place in Australian society and about ensuring that they share the rights of other Australians to pursue their ways of life, within the law, as they wish (including maintaining aspects of their national, religious or ethnic identity if that’s what they want). If our political parties had come together in ‘selling’ the decency of this policy in straightforward, pragmatic language the talkback shows might have lost some of their most basic material. Unfortunately the adjective ‘multicultural’ has been used at times as if it is the principal description of Australia, suggesting that the only groups who are ‘cultural’ are ethnic groups. We should always be ready to proclaim that Australians make up an inclusive society of multi-faith, multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-racial origin. We should not appear to proclaim an Australia in which most Australians are included out.

An interlude: one of the most regrettable of Geoffrey Blainey’s sad fits of frenzy in the 1980s was his scare phrase that Australia was becoming ‘a nation of tribes’. Again what needs stressing is how ordinary diversity is in any society. Post war immigration has added to our diversity. But it hasn’t fractured our society. The fact is that Australia’s post-war immigration program has produced less social friction, less serious division, than immigration programs usually do. As to the idea of a divided society, not only was white Australian society significantly split for most of its existence by Catholic-Protestant inter-hatreds; it is still split by differences between country and metropolitan areas and between economic classes – both of which were so great that they were one of the formations of our political culture. Nothing like that has come from the immigration programs.

It’s worth remembering that xenophobia can rage most destructively between entrenched ethnic groups within a nation, with
animosities that go back hundreds of years - as in many European countries; as between sects within Muslim countries; as in most of the recently formed African states; and as in many of the states of Asia. But now that the imported Protestant-Catholic divisiveness has gone, there is none of that kind of entrenchment here. We should remember that the great mixing of peoples that has gone on in Australia for five decades has produced - in world terms - no significant outward disorder.

I’ll finish off with references to tolerance, and to the need for a civic identity

**TOLERANCE.** A great hold up in some discussions about getting on with each other has been the failure to find a word for it. I see no substitute for ‘tolerance’. (I’m not speaking just of ‘ethnic’ differences – but of all those things people don’t like about each other.) ‘Respect’ doesn’t make it: why on earth should we respect people we think are idiots? We can accept their right to be idiotic. But why should we respect them for it? How about starting with a more realistic idea of what tolerance means? It doesn’t mean that we should all love each other, or even that we should all respect each other. It means that we should be able to accept mutual non-violent coexistence, tolerating in each other characteristics that we may even hate, living together as citizens on publicly equal terms.

I spent my boyhood in the Hunter Valley town of Muswellbrook and from our veranda I could see the symbols of our division – on one side the Anglican Church, with the town clock on its steeple, the less ambitious spire of the Presbyterian Church, the tin roof of the Methodist chapel, the battlements of the Masonic Lodge; on the other side the Catholic church with a spire equal to the Anglican one, the presbytery where the priests lived; the convent where the nuns lived, the buildings where they ran their school. On our side truth and enlightenment, on their side error and superstition. Make no mistake about it. We were right and they were wrong. They even looked physically different from us - a different race. Yet we didn’t burn down their convent. They didn’t burn down our Masonic Lodge. Both sides despised and distrusted each other. Neither respected the other. But they could still treat each other civilly.

Three further points about tolerance:

- **Don’t expect too much.** To make it work, one has to approach tolerance with a certain antiseptic coolness ...
- **Or even respect one another ...** Imagine instead that we can accept difference and conflict: we can live in peaceful co-existence even with those we hate or despise.

- **Tolerance is not ‘patronising’.** It means I tolerate you. You tolerate me.

- **Tolerance is not based on cultural relativism.** Anything does not go ... Suttee is out ... Clitoridectomy is out ... Stoning to death of adulteresses is out... and so, I believe, should be the sexual subjugation of 15-year-old girls. Nothing is gained by saying of some group ‘that is their culture’. The SS had a culture and Auschwitz is its monument.

I’ll just add a footnote on tact. As Noel Pearson, Rosemary Neil and Hal Wootten have pointed out – and so have many others – it’s not an act of kindness to the Indigenous people to cover up all of the many things that can go wrong in Indigenous communities. This is a discussion that must be conducted with scrupulous honesty. But it does also require great care in how you put it.

Many Australians still go on talking about ‘national identity’ as if there is some agreed model out there – some normative paradigm – of how to be an Australian. It is infantile that we have not replaced this elusive quest for an ethnic identity by putting in what is the missing piece in multiculturalism - an affirmation of a precise civic identity in which whatever else Australians think about their differences, they acknowledge that they are equally citizens. During last year’s centenary of federation commemorations not one political leader came up to scratch with this. It was an alarming failure in rhetoric. They could talk the Bush or Anzac or mateship or whatever but not one of them could state what might be thought of as our civic contract. Well I’m happy to provide some speakers’notes now. Their core would be five points: a commitment to maintain the rule of law; to strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy based on universal adult suffrage and on freedom of opinion; to maintain the ideal of equality under the law of all Australians; to uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society; and to continue to develop Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people. When we finally have a Constitution that explains our system of government in plain words, if we add to them recognition of Australia as an inclusive society of multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-national and multi-racial origin, valuing the unique status of the Indigenous people and respecting and caring for the land we share those five points can be the prelude to that most necessary change = a new Constitution that can be taught in schools and become the basis for Australian belief.
A lukewarm reception:
The cooling of Sweden’s asylum-seeker policies

Sweden is often referred to as the ideal country in its treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees and is renowned for its social welfare system. Swedish journalist HELENA JANSSON finds that despite this, it is not faultless.

Oils of razor wire and barbed wired fences don’t surround the asylum-seekers in Sweden, but hunger strikes still take place amongst them. Suicide attempts, too. It might not be as common as in Australia, but it happens.

When it comes to asylum-seekers and refugees in Sweden, they are generally treated with more respect and humanity than in Australia. The issue being discussed in relation to asylum-seekers in Sweden are a far cry from those taking place in Australia.

Dr Kjerstin Almqvist is a clinical psychologist at Karlstad University in Sweden, who has mainly studied the effects of violence on child refugees. She is shocked when I tell her that all asylum-seekers, even women, children and unaccompanied minors, are locked up in Australia. She knew of such conditions in some parts of the world, but believed it was better in Australia. “In comparison to that,” she says, “our concerns are obviously miles away. Here we discuss how much health care or dental care one should have the right to as an asylum-seeker,” she says, and laughs.

When asked if unaccompanied children have their own bedrooms or if they share rooms in the group accommodation or reception centres that the Migration Board provides, Kjerstin answers: “No, we don’t have anything like that… everybody in the same room, not in Sweden!”

“I must have been in Australia for too long,” I say and explain that many asylum-seekers in Australia have to share rooms in the detention centres and that they are often shoveled into big halls together.

“No, that doesn’t exist here,” she says.

What is called a refugee camp, or refugee centre in Sweden is often misunderstood abroad. They are actually ordinary residential flats in normal residential areas where mainly asylum-seekers and refugees live. Municipalities in more rural areas usually have vacant residential properties that they lease to the Migration Board.

Unaccompanied children often live together in group accommodation where they have their own bedrooms but share their kitchen and living room. Most families get their own accommodation, but sometimes smaller families or single asylum-seekers, who do not know each other, might have to share a flat and that is when problems sometimes arise, according to Kjerstin. “But in the international perspective, I guess, one should look at these as luxury conflicts”, she says.

Kjerstin tells of situations in Denmark and Belgium where asylum-seekers might have to live in large enclosures in camp-like environments that are not
suitable for children. In the early 1990s, when Sweden had an influx of more than 80,000 Bosnian asylum-seekers, the asylum-seekers had to live in large refugee centres, which proved to be an unsuitable environment for children.

The strength in the Swedish system seems to be that child refugees are generally treated in the same way as Swedish children and that they live in ordinary accommodation within the community. Asylum-seeking children have the same rights, and free care, as Swedish children to education, health care, dental care and medical care. Once they have applied for asylum, schooling is arranged. The council of the county in which the children live receives a government grant so that they can give the children the care they need.

But there are weaknesses as well. The major problem seems to be the long waiting times for the result of refugee status. “It’s too long,” says Anders Sundquist, an immigration lawyer at Rådgivningsbyrån in Stockholm. On average, it takes one to one and half years before you get a result from the Migration Board, he explains, and it takes another eight to twelve months if you appeal that decision.

The decision from the Migration Board is somewhat quicker when it comes to unaccompanied children; on average it takes 6 months.

Kjerstin Almqvist knows that the long waiting causes destructive processes for children and their families “We have seen that this is often psychologically a very hard process for the children, because when a few years have gone by small children are so rooted in Sweden that it’s very difficult for them to imagine to return home.”

There have been discussions that the long waiting times, caused by the judicial processes, should be speeded up and Kjerstin thinks one has to do so for the sake of the children. “One can’t have these long hearing of cases, even if I know it’s an expression of a law-governed society where one has the opportunity to appeal in different instances.”

Anders Sundquist believes that Sweden honestly aspires to prioritise children’s needs, but that the country cannot cope with it because of lack of resources. “The dilemma today is that we get more and more asylum-seekers all the time so the system doesn’t cope.”

“The strength in the Swedish system seems to be that child refugees are generally treated in the same way as Swedish children and that they live in ordinary accommodation within the community”

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Swedish Aliens Act on the best interest of the child affect the way the Swedish Migration Board consider children’s asylum applications.

Clinical psychologist Almqvist believes that Sweden has broken the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and refers to ‘different’ interpretations of the UN Convention and the Swedish Aliens Act. The Swedish Aliens Act has precedence over the Child Convention, and Kjerstin does not support this. “Practically, it means that a family with a child can be deported even though the child, for example, might need medical care in Sweden. This is not given adequate consideration in applications for asylum.”

Another problem, which has been widely discussed in the Swedish media, is the disappearance of unaccompanied minors from the Migration Board’s group accommodation for young people. In mid-September, the major Swedish daily newspapers reported that 49 children and young people had disappeared this year, and 23 of those that summer.

There are various speculations for the reason of their disappearance. One explanation is that the young people might have received a negative result from the Migration Board and therefore gone underground, or another that they might have gone to another country to try and apply for asylum. But there are also suspicions that some young people have gone into prostitution.

Kjerstin can see how lone children can fall into prostitution and explains how there is a current investigation into a paedophilia scandal in relation to the refugee centres. “It’s about someone using children who are seeking contact and who are defenceless. And one can imagine that children who are seeking contact and who are defenceless can fall into other trouble as well,” she says.

In September, a 39-year old man was sentenced to five years in prison, for sexual abuse of four refugee children and for the crime of possessing child pornography. The man had been working as a janitor at a refugee centre.
Kjerstin points out that personnel working with child refugees lack competence and resources. There are not enough employees per child and no special education is required for people who work with refugee children. “They have been prioritising people with an immigration background, and there are some good reasons for this, such as competence in languages and understanding of children’s backgrounds, but they don’t have the same requirements as employees in the Swedish childcare. I think it has meant that some people have not acted as professionally as one might have wished for in certain circumstances.”

The disappearances of children led to a debate about who is actually responsible for the unaccompanied children arriving in Sweden - the Migration Board or the municipalities where the children live. A government appointed committee recommended that several municipalities should bear responsibility for unaccompanied children’s welfare whereas the Migration Board only should bear responsibility for children’s asylum applications.

While it has gradually become more difficult to receive refugee status, asylum-seekers and their legal representatives have turned to humanitarian reasons. “It has become more common in the past years that one focuses on psychological ill health as a way of receiving residence permit,” Kjerstin explains. “There’s now a situation of accelerating psychological ill health in children which intersects in a very unpleasant way with the asylum process and is supported by their legal representative.”

Over the past few years, suicide attempts among children have become more common. In a period of six months (from late 2001 to early 2002) eight young people at Carlslund Refugee Centre attempted to commit suicide and in April there were five attempts at another youth centre.

The clinical psychologist sees this trend as worrying, but explains that there is not much gained if a person gets better after feeling ill, but if he or she becomes worse it can benefit the application. She emphasizes, however, that this does not happen consciously. “A lot of children feel very strained because of their family’s situation, Mum is sad and Dad is sad and they feel bad… and if the children express how ill they feel then the situation might become better.”

Another major weakness in the treatment of asylum-seeker is that the youngest children do not have access to child welfare in the same way as Swedish children. The youngest children are at home with their parents, which might seem reasonable since the parents usually cannot work and therefore stay at home. However, ten years ago, according to Kjerstin, when the Migration Board had more resources, it used to arrange child welfare activities and pre-school activities for the children as well as the parents. But with fewer resources most of those activities had to stop. The Swedish child welfare system no longer has the same qualities as it used to either, Kjerstin mentions. The sizes of children’s groups in day care centres have doubled and budget cuts for the public sector have affected both Swedish and refugee children.

For a long time, adult asylum-seekers have not been given work permits. Lately, the Migration Board has stated that if the asylum-seeking process is going to take longer than four months, the person in question will be permitted to work. But, according to Kjerstin, it is better in theory than in practice, and it is still very difficult for an asylum-seeker to get a work permit.

There is obviously room for improvement in Sweden’s treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees. The long waiting times have to be dealt with, and the qualification of people working with child refugees must be addressed too. Kjerstin also believes that it is important to focus more on children who have witnessed their mothers being violently abused. In the past year she has paid special attention to two children who have witnessed their mother being raped during war. She is interested in how the interplay between children and mothers has been damaged because of war.

“I’ve seen small children who look as if they were autistic; they don’t talk, they don’t look at you, they don’t smile, they hardly move. They have an expiring expression which is heartbreaking, partly as a result of what they’ve been through, but primarily, maybe, because their mother have pushed them away, because the mothers can’t stand being close to them since the
children’s nearness raises such painful posttraumatic reactions in them.”

She believes this situation requires more attention, since these children are in need of proper assistance and urgent care and that other primary minders for the children, the fathers for example, might have to take over if the mother can’t take care of them. “They can’t wait two or three years for their mothers to recover; by then they will have already been damaged to much in their development.”

There are relatively good opportunities for assistance for children who have suffered trauma to be treated by psychologists, according to Kjerstin. But refugee children do not have any better opportunities than the Swedish children do. “There are generally long queues to the child psychiatry in Sweden and the refugee children get stuck in the queues in the same way as Swedish children do. Sometimes there are unacceptable long waiting times, but there are no special waiting times because they are refugee children.”

Fact box Sweden

Sweden, with a population of 8.9 million hosted nearly 18,500 refugees and asylum-seekers at the end of 2001.

During 2001, 23,515 persons applied for asylum in Sweden – this was an increase of 7200 since the previous year. The increase mainly depended on the fact that the border controls between the Schengen countries were taken down. The largest groups of people came from Iraq (6,206), Yugoslavia (3,102), and Bosnia Herzegovina (2,775). Others came from Iran, Russia, El Salvador and Afghanistan.

The Swedish Migration Board is the first-instance decision-making authority and it issued nearly 18,400 asylum decisions during the year. Cases can be appealed at the Aliens Appeals Board. Until the Migration Board makes a decision the asylum-seeker can choose to stay with relatives or friends or in an apartment arranged by the Migration Board.

At the end of year 2000, some 6000 children under the age of 18 were registered with the Migration Board. Between 400 and 500 children arrive without their legal guardian in Sweden every year.

Schooling is arranged for school-aged child refugees in the same way as for Swedish children. The responsibility for providing education lies within the local authority of where the child lives. Children who seek asylum are entitled to health care, dental care and medical care in the same way as Swedish children.

The social service committee in the local authority area where unaccompanied children live has responsibility for the well being of the child. The committee might place the child in one of the Board’s group accommodation centres or in their youth accommodation centres. A trustee is also appointed to help the child apply for asylum.
Last December the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc held its Annual General Meeting and End-of-year celebration. The party, which was held in the gardens at Parkville, with a light meal, drinks, live music and children’s activities, was attended by 400 people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds.

Paris Aristotle, the director thanked organizations and individuals that had contributed throughout the year to the work of the Foundation, including the ANZ trustees for funding the Strategic Impact Program. Paris also made reference to the professorial Chair established by Deakin University to oversee the Foundation’s research program.

“This level of integration with direct service, research, project and policy development, all within a community based agency is rare and hopefully we will be able to capitalize on what this offers. We hope that it can be a help to all of our work and can strengthen the contribution we bring to our partnerships and collective efforts.” Paris said.

Dr Rob Moodie, CEO of VicHealth launched the Rainbow Program for Children in Refugee Families Guide. Dr Moodie spoke about the images of the Calendar titled ‘Getting On,’ “what you see in those pictures is intelligence, laughter, wisdom, tragedy, connection and above all love and hope.” He said. The calendar was launched by actress Deborra-Lee Furness who also spoke about the plight of refugees and the contribution we can make to their lives.

And making a difference to refugees is the mission of the Foundation. “In our little patch we continue to try to make a difference and build the capacity of this agency to do so. It feels very small on the scale of things but the more we can improve the response to the plight of refugees in Australia then no matter how small the contribution may be, it is nonetheless important anyway.” He said.

Paris predicted a difficult year for 2003. “the one thing that we can be relatively confident in is that its going to continue to be difficult in the year to come. Talk of war, fears about terrorism and the continued plight of refugees around the world seem to be rolling on like a runaway train.” He added.

Olga Yoldi
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FILM REVIEW
Reviewed by David Bolton

BENEATH CLOUDS
d. Ivan Sen 2002

Amid an extraordinary crop of fine Australian films this year dealing with Aboriginal themes (Rabbit-Proof Fence, The Tracker, Australian Rules), Ivan Sen’s Beneath Clouds, about two young kids on the road, stands out as the most intensely personal.

Lena (Danielle Hall) is fair-haired, blue-eyed and fine-boned: her mother an Aboriginal, her father an absent Irishman. Jack of life in Moree, where the only future is early (and frequent) pregnancy, Lena takes the bus to the city in search of her father, her only guides a terse postcard and an old photograph. Vaughn (Damian Hall) is a sullen teenager on the run from a work farm, headed to the city and his dying mother even though she never visited him all the time he spent inside. In a small central Western pit stop, Lena misses her bus; by chance they hook up and try their luck hitching to Sydney.

The world has nothing to offer that they can truly call their own. Vaughn and the tough, angry young men he hangs out with kit themselves out in Nike swooshes and gangsta gear; at the work farm a poster of murdered rapper Tu Pac adorns his wall. Virtually no-one picks Lena as an Aboriginal; her dream of Ireland is a hopeless fantasy and a Celtic escape. Both have everything to run from and nothing to run to. Out in the vast cotton plains of northern NSW it’s easy to fall into fatalism, despair and cliché. Vaughn swears he can take on the White Man’s world and beat it; Lena knows he can’t.

Beneath Clouds avoids sloganeering and the obvious answers without ducking the obvious problems. Its beauty derives from the spacious landscape and unending skies of NSW around Moree and Rylstone; but even more so from the restraint of the two young leads, who are in every scene and who have never acted before. Initially guarded and mutually suspicious, they slowly drop their guard and open up. Yet Vaughn never guesses that Lena is Aboriginal too – only one other character, an elderly woman with no English, guesses that. Graced by a small cast, including the always dignified Arthur Dignam, nothing is ever quite as it seems. Which is fitting for a film as eloquent and as deceptively simple as this.
Reviewed by David Findlay

BOY OVERBOARD

MORRIS GLEITZMAN

(PUFFIN, 181pp. $14.95 r.r.p.)

While the effects of war and other traumatising events on children has been well documented I find myself wondering what the effects have been, on Australian children, of the rhetoric, propaganda and outright lies arising from the Tampa and “children not overboard” affairs, and mandatory detention. Have they accepted the suggestions of some of our politicians that the asylum seekers are “not like us, not the sort of people we would want in this country”, that self-mutilation and violence are “part of their culture”?

Hopefully, Morris Gleitzman’s book will go part way to dispel this racism. Gleitzman is well known for his novels dealing with children’s misperceptions of adults’ utterances and behaviour. His books gently satirise both the adults and children. His intent in Boy overboard is, necessarily, more serious. That is not to say that the book lacks humour. It is, like his earlier work, Two weeks with the queen (1990) which dealt sensitively with cancer, AIDS and a gay couple both an answer to the current hysteria and an enjoyable adventure story.

The narrative in Boy overboard concerns an Afghan boy Jamal, his soccer playing sister Bibi and their parents. First we are shown the position of females, both young and old, under the Taliban regime- Bibi must disguise herself as a boy to play soccer with Jamal and his friends; her mother must operate her school for girls underground. Of course, the secret school is discovered and the family must flee, first to Pakistan, then Indonesia, then Australia (Christmas Island) by overcrowded and unseaworthy boats.

Despite the horrors of the family’s situation there is humour in the book arising not only from the typically Gleitzman misunderstandings but also from the children’s marvelous resilience. All the characters in the novel exhibit strengths and weaknesses that not only drive the action but show us people who are human in their faults. Similarly, Andrew (a member of the Australian Navy who picks up the children from their sinking boat) embodies all that is positive and endearing about those Australians who still believe in the fair go.

While one might criticise the author for presenting the baddies (Taliban officials, “people smugglers”, and so on) as one dimensionally evil, we need to bear in mind that this book is aimed at children. This book is important not only for its enjoyable story but also because it raises questions of gender discrimination, human rights, cultural difference - concluding that we are basically the same. Jamal and Bibi may eat different food, speak a different language, wear different clothes, but in the end, like us, they want a happy, unhassled life – to play soccer if that is your bent- in other words to use a term much abused by politicians and commentators “a fair go”.

More information about the novel and characters, as well as teacher aids can be found at: http://www.penguin.com.au/puffin/spotlight/f_spotlight.cfm

People interested in similar books for children/young adults might like to look at:

• Jumping to heaven: stories about refugee children (edited by Katharine Goode. Wakefield Press, 1997)
• One day we had to run: refugee children tell their stories in words and paintings (edited by Sybella Wilkes. Evans Bros.)
• Parvana: a young girl’s fight to survive in Afghanistan (Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2002)- pub. in U.K. as The Breadwinner.
• More than gold (John Heffernan. Scholastic, 2000.)
• The other side of the truth (Beverley Naidoo. Puffin, 2000.)
Reviews

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON CHILDREN

The impact of war on children / Graca Machel; photographs by Sebastiao Salgado.
Hurst & Co., 2002. 247pp. isbn 1-85065-485-9 r.r.p. $49.95

“Adults go to war, but they don’t realize what damage they are doing to children”
- A Nicaraguan child

In armed conflicts in the 1990s two million children died, 6 million were permanently disabled or seriously injured, and 20 million were uprooted or displaced [source: United Nations Children’s Fund]. What, one wonders, would be the effect in the West if we were reminded nightly on the news of these horrifying statistics?

War wounds children’s bodies and minds, destroys their spirits, despite their natural resilience they become vulnerable when families and communities are torn asunder, schools destroyed, and stability shattered. These wounds and their effects are felt long after hostilities have ceased.

So this is, unfortunately, a timely and necessary book. (A search of the phrase “impact of war on children” through Google on the internet results in 885 hits! – a lot of people out there are concerned about the problem).

The original report and this book were necessary in order to build consensus among governments on the need to ameliorate the effects of organised violence on children.

Graca Machel is well qualified to compile this report, she set up schools in war-affected Mozambique before becoming that country’s Minister for Education. In 1994 was appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to chair the Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. This book is the public version of the report submitted to the UN in 1996.

In 15 chapters we are told that children have been not only unintended victims but deliberate targets of violence, with millions killed, disabled, orphaned, sexually exploited and abused, abducted and recruited as soldiers, infected with HIV/AIDS and other diseases. Tellingly, she finds that the brunt of these human rights violations against children is borne, predominately, by children from poorer families, and or minority/indigenous groups.

The original 1996 report was the first comprehensive assessment of these conditions, it laid the foundation for the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. In 2000 the UN adopted an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child banning the involvement of children under 18 years from direct participation in hostilities.

5 years on Machel finds that some progress has been made on her recommendations, but the situation of children in conflict prone countries is as bad as, if not worse, than five years ago. For example the number of child combatants has increases from 250,000 to 300,000.

The documentation of child recruits show how distressingly widespread the practice is:

- using 10 year old Burmese as land mine detectors
- Taliban using child recruits from Afghanistan & Pakistan
- Angola employing 3,000 child soldiers
- Sri Lanka with its Baby Brigade & Leopard Brigade

- all this despite the many international and regional standards put in place to prevent recruitment of children. (There are exceptions, however, the USA hasn’t signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (COTROC) and the UK has reserved the right to use children as soldiers “if the need arises”)

The stories and images in the book are both challenging and tragic. However, they put faces and names, and details of place and time to the bald statistics. They humanize the impersonal numbers.

The photography is beautiful and horrific, showing the children’s strength, stoicism and resilience.

My few criticisms of the book concern the, perhaps, lack of emphasis on their role of the West in entangling children in war and its consequences e.g. the sanctions against Iraq that have result in the deaths of between 500,000 and 5,000,000 children; or the sale of weaponry, especially landmines, by countries such as USA, UK and Australia. Also, despite the text being heavily cited and containing ample statistics, there is no index. Perhaps, the attitude
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to children is less hypocritical in the Developing World. In Liberal Western Democracies we mouth the right platitudes but have no qualms about locking children up in camps in the desert; refusing to ban land-mines, or refusing to sign COTROC.

On a positive note, Michel illustrates the importance women play in building peace, and reconstructing their families and communities. She argues for the importance of education in rehabilitation. She showcases programmes that have been put in place since 1996. The West must support her call for the end of impunity for crimes against children.

Finally, one can but agree with exhortation “but we still have very far to go before we can say that our promises to children are fulfilled”

Some of the information and statistics contained in this book can be found at:

www.unicef.org
www.child-soldiers.org
IT'S UP TO US

The world is around us,
But it is also in our hands.

We have seen the colours of many nations,
Smelt the scent of exotic spices,
Heard the drums, guitars, the music.
We have felt the one water through our fingers,
But our mouths were fouled with the words of the past.

Hatred. Racism. WAR.

Hatred that separated fellow men,
Racism that promoted ignorance,
And WAR- The beginning of famine,
Disease and death.

We who hold the world in our hands-
Youth of today,
Leaders of tomorrow-
Have seen man's judgement, The Battle of Armageddon on Earth,
And have realised that we are
The chosen ones,
And that we must strive,
Hand in hand,
To deliver the Promised Land.

We can see many nations living as one,
Smell the exotic spices,
Hear the drums, guitars, the music.
We can feel the one water through our fingers
And we can sing the songs of peace.

By Phuong Au
Year 11
Cabramatta High School