

Yusuf's dream



Yusuf had a dream that he could escape persecution in Iraq and find safe haven for his family in Australia. A graphic designer, who worked on a paper which ran foul of Saddam Hussein, he suffered Saddam's wrath along with all the other staff. Taking his wife and two small children, they fled to Syria. The long journey to Australia was too dangerous and too expensive for the whole family, so Yusuf went alone. By Peter Williamson

Perhaps he was naïve to believe that Australia would take him in. But they had done so for others, and Australia had a reputation for kindness to refugees. He dreamed, too, that one day he would go to the zoo, and watch the kangaroos through the bars. He could never have foreseen the treatment he would receive. Arriving in Australia's arid North by boat from Indonesia, Yusuf realised quickly that there would be no warm reception. His nightmare had begun.

The Australian authorities did not accept Yusuf's story. Although they condemned Saddam Hussein's brutality and labeled him the world's worst dictator, there would be no asylum for Yusuf and thousands of other Iraqis being persecuted at home. Yusuf made himself useful, and his English improved rapidly. In the Port Hedland Detention Centre he helped as an interpreter for his captors. He got drawn into endless negotiations, resolving crises, and working as an intermediary in bureaucratic communications.

Yusuf asked to be released so that he could go somewhere

else in the world. The Australian government said "No". They would not send him back to Iraq, and no one else would take him. He could not be released into the Australian community, so despite having committed no crime, he would be in indefinite detention. The situation was Kafkaesque.

Eventually depression and exhaustion got to him, and in one single act of compassion, they agreed to give him a break from his unpaid work in Port Hedland, and they transferred him to Villawood. That is where I met him.

Lawyers had taken up his case, and were challenging the legality of his detention. He was now hopeful, that something could be done. But three and a half years into his detention, Yusuf ran out of hope. War clouds were gathering in the Middle East and he thought of his wife and his children, now 9 and 10 years old, and he realised that they needed him.

Syria agreed to give Yusuf a visa, valid for six months, but no more. As I write this, Yusuf must be sitting on a plane at Sydney Airport. A guard will be sitting next to him, until his plane lands

in Thailand, and it is deemed no risk that he can return to Australia.

It is a hot muggy day in Sydney. Yusuf has seen many hot days in Australia. Bar a few trips into Port Hedland, to the dentist and to the shops, he never saw the outside of a detention centre. Even when he was transferred from Sydney Airport to Villawood, he was put in a van with blacked out windows. He never saw the beach, and he never saw the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Opera House, or had a walk in the Australian bush. And, of course, he never got to go to the zoo.

He did see the kangaroos, however. One day in Port Hedland, two kangaroos hopped up to the fence of the detention centre. Yusuf stared at the strange animals, looking back at him. He thought it was odd the way the kangaroos stared at him, and that he was on the other side of the fence, the one behind the wire.

Afterword

Yusuf made it to Syria, but he was robbed of his money by guards at Bangkok Airport. He is still looking for a safe place to live.