

National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention

Sydney Public Hearing

Friday, 4 April 2014

- President** So with those basic comments in mind, may I call the first witness.
- Thank you Ms Jezan, it is a great pleasure to have you here, would you like to make an opening statement?
- Ms Jezan** Yes, I would like to thank the Australian Human Rights Commission for giving me this opportunity to come here and be a witness today and also to open up awareness of what has happened previously which was over 10 years ago now and it is happening again at the moment.
- President** Thank you very much. Would you like to make your statement?
- Ms Jezan** Well..
- President** Oh, you have thank you very much. Good. In which case then, I would like to ask you some questions if I may. Firstly perhaps just to give us a little bit of a sense of your background, could you tell us why you with your family came to Australia?
- Ms Jezan** Okay, for my family and myself we came to Australia due to severe religious persecution in Iran
- President** In Iran.
- Ms Jezan** In Iran so we've suffered a lot of religious persecution due to being a minority religious group in Iran of the Sabian Mandaean which are not recognised in Iran.
- President** Can you tell me that sect again?
- Ms Jezan** Sabian Mandaean that is the name of the religion.
- President** Thank you very much.
- Ms Jezan** Followers of John the Baptist.
- President** And that is a minority essentially Christian Group in Iran?
- Ms Jezan** In Iran, yes.
- President** Thank you. Perhaps you could tell us first when you came to Australia.

Ms Jezan Yes, it was 2001, it was April 2001 and I was 12 years old.

President And you were 12. And how long were you detained?

Ms Jezan 3 years and 2 months.

President So, when you left detention you were coming up for 16?

Ms Jezan Yes it was just before my 16th birthday, it was 2004, June 2004.

President And then you attended school?

Ms Jezan I attended school when we were still in detention. My brother, sister and I were one of the first kids to be able to go to school and back to the detention centre as an experiment to see if that would work with other children, which worked, so we did start school in 2002 and attended school [inaudible] released we continued.

President Which detention centre were you in?

Ms Jezan Villawood.

President Villawood. And you attended then a local school and you would leave the detention centre in the morning and a bus would pick you up and then you would come back at night?

Ms Jezan That's correct.

President And can you tell us about your feelings on coming back into detention and what the security checks might have been?

Ms Jezan It was very hard going into school knowing that we couldn't tell the other kids at school where we were coming from. We would get picked up by different security guards, taken to the school and then picked up in the afternoon by the same people, we couldn't do anything after school. either our parents were still locked up in the detention centre so we were not even able to do anything if we it was in our power as well. It was very difficult it was difficult in the sense the children didn't know, teachers knew, we felt that we were different in some way but didn't know how and why and it was just towards the end where we started telling kids and children at school when they kept questioning us, why do you get picked up by a different persons every day, why this, why that, so we have to come up with different stories, it was my brother and I were like we can't tell them, because they might look at us differently so we decided not to tell them, but going back was extremely difficult.

President Each day, and what about school excursions and so on, were you able to do those?

Ms Jezan We were able to but we had to give prior notice to the security guard and also the Department way earlier notice than every other kid will, they used to sometimes take us to the place of the excursion so we couldn't travel with the kids on the same bus and they would come and pick us up from that premises as well. It was when my brother had to do his Year 10 work experience where he wasn't able to do it and it was literally the day before they said why don't you just do it in the school library because you won't be [*inaudible*]. I was fortunate I did my work experience just before we left the detention centre. I was able to do it at one of Australia's biggest law firms as well, so that was fortunate but it took a very long time before that awareness was opened up.

President So really, from the time you were at school you tried to keep it secret that you were actually in a detention centre, and did you make friends?

Ms Jezan We did make a lot of friends but there were friends we couldn't see after school, there were friends where we couldn't contact because we had no mobile phones at that time as well, everything was a secret. The school was very nice and actually started opening up the library longer hours just for us my sister, my brother and I, just so we can stay in there and study after school and so we can actually see children, we can use the internet, there was no internet facilities back then as well.

President Well thank you, just to return to the main theme, can you tell us about the main impressions and legacy for you of living in a detention centre for most of the time?

Ms Jezan It was extremely difficult. It was difficult in a sense where there were other people who were extremely aggressive, sensitive, stressed, angry, we have seen a lot of different things from people in there. And again, because we came from a very small minority group my parents have taught us don't associate with them, we are in a detention centre we don't know what they're like, so that was again another issue that we [*inaudible*] and they actually made us isolate ourselves in our rooms rather than interact with other people. We were there for a long time, we were there for 3½ years, so every time, there were little bits of things that is still in my mind for instance the roll call that they have to do, they all had to do 5 times roll call in one day, one of them had to be done at 4.00 am and they would knock on the door, and if you don't open the door they will open the door and shine a torch in there.

President What was the reason for a roll call at that hour of the night?

Ms Jezan It was because the first month that we were there there was around 50 or 55 people that run away from the detention centre, they dug a tunnel underneath and run away

from the detention centre, that was the reason why they were doing the check-up. But the check-ups was constant until just before we left.

President Did you feel safe in detention?

Ms Jezan Again, back to opening the door in the middle of the night, if you don't open the door for roll call, no.

President And what about the general environment and the people you were mixing with, did you feel safe in that context?

Ms Jezan Well most of the time I myself was out of detention centre going to school until I get home in the afternoon where I would stay in the room studying and catching up with the work that I have to catch up with. On the weekend it was exactly the same, so in that sense, no there was not much safety in there, there was not much thought put into it as well.

President Well, as you know we are very interested in the long-term impacts of detention and that is why we are particularly pleased to have an opportunity to talk to you because you can tell us what those impacts have been on your life, because of course we are concerned about the children who are currently being held in detention. Could you tell us what you think your time in immigration detention, what the impact of that was, long term for you as you've obviously grown into a young woman and working and educated, what do you think was the long term impact on your mental and physical health?

Ms Jezan As for me, I grew out of it very quickly and I kind of had to put it behind me very quickly. The reason for that was because my dad suffered severely due to being locked up for a very long time. My sister and my brother and I left that aside and grew up and I am currently finishing off my law degree and work in one of the best immigration offices in Australia Playfair so I had that opportunity to go out of it and for me it's helping people getting out of the same situation, however in the long term I do think about it, I do think about it, not daily, but at least once a week. I would think how you fall behind in education, which I fell behind for almost 2 years of education because we were locked up for that long and there were a lot of people that are in remote countries or remote places that don't have access to education. That's even harder for those people. But that I think was one thing which I keep thinking about. If I was to be able to start earlier I would have probably finished off my law degree. I don't have to drag it on longer than that. So that's the impact that I keep thinking about. For instance, my brother hoped to finish at high school when he was twenty where he had to finish when he was eighteen. Again, that falls back to lack of education, not being able to start earlier.

President You mentioned your father being very affected by detention. One of the things we are interested in exploring is what is the effect on a child to observe their parents being visibly distressed, upset, depressed and so on?

Ms Jezan OK so when we were coming, when we left Iran due to severe persecution, we weren't intending to come to Australia. It was the fact of leaving Iran and finding a way to get somewhere else. We were placed in the hand of [*inaudible*]smuggler. It was our choice. It was somehow you just getting there. You were told so many good things and you believed and my father promised us a year of hardship, and we had to suffer for almost three and a half years. That was what kept eating him inside, was the fact that he promised and he couldn't deliver that to us, and for us to see that, him suffering that much we had to somehow pull it together. We couldn't show him, and even my mother, how we were suffering. When we first arrived to Australia my dad was actually extremely ill. When we got off the boat, in a coma for 18 days which even made it harder for him to pull together, and he still suffers till today. When we were travelling my dad's English was so well, he was an interpreter at the detention centre. Now to try and talk to him, you can't. That's the suffrage that he has gone through.

President So really, you and your brother had to be stronger because your father was obviously suffering and presumably your mother also?

Ms Jezan Yeah.

President Hmmm. Can you tell us a little bit about the mood and behaviour of other people in the detention centre, and possibly even other younger people like yourselves?

Ms Jezan There were not many young people. Villawood didn't have many young kids. If they had them they would be over-stayers, by which they will stay there for a very short period of time and leave. There was one other family that was there for a long time and they kept being transferred from one detention centre to another, and they were exactly in the same situation where the son will [*inaudible*] sew their lips, will harm themselves, will cut their wrists, will dig graves, won't eat for three days and we saw all of it happening. We saw all the suicidals.

President And you saw that amongst adults and children?

Ms Jezan Adults and children. Adults and younger, mainly males. With females you see it more as in they're taking it inside, but the males were the ones that showed a lot more aggressiveness towards what was happening, and I believe that was probably due to [*inaudible*] not knowing when they would be released, not knowing what's happening.

President [inaudible] at not knowing what the [inaudible] be released, but actually exacerbated the situation. And did you ... were there others of your age group that you could become friends with in ...

Ms Jezan No. They would be therefore a month or two ...

President A short time.

Ms Jezan ... and they would leave.

President A very long time. And were you aware that you were getting legal advice and assistance?

Ms Jezan Yes, we were very fortunate to use ... have had a lot of good people that used to visit the detention centre, used to give us a lot of support which they still do till today. They helped us a lot with legal advice and legal representation. So from that part, yes, that was.

President And can you tell us your impression of the quality of the medical care that you received while you were there?

Ms Jezan Very poor. Very poor. The only medications that you could get at the detention centre where I was, it was panadol. Got a headache, have panadol. Stomach ache [inaudible], whatever the situation will be that was the only thing that was available.

President And if you wanted to see a medical doctor, would you be able to make that appointment in a reasonable period of time?

Ms Jezan Within a week.

President A week ... uhuh. And what about specialist attention, possibly for your father?

Ms Jezan They would, they used to send him off to see a specialist every now and then.

President Uhuh, uhuh.

Ms Jezan Probably the time that were there, they probably sent him off three times. Probably needed a lot more. When we first got out he used to see the specialist as one time a year wasn't sufficient offering that time.

President Can you tell us in your observation, and I know this is many years ago, but can you tell us a little bit about how the people who were self-harming or threatening suicide were treated?

Ms Jezan Well to stop it, otherwise they will be deported back to their home country. That was the only thing that ... again my ... we were young so my parents didn't want us to face that and used to always say don't go out [*inaudible*], but that was what we [*inaudible*] [*inaudible*] don't stop we'll send you back.

President So your parents really did try in a way to isolate you from the more distressing aspects of the detention centre at Villawood?

Ms Jezan But it was harder for them, because they're trying to deal with the legal representation, trying to see where we're heading and again, but that surrounding you as well.

President Well I wonder if again, we could just return to this general question of how you feel that that period in detention has affected your life? Do you feel that it affects your mental health today? You've told us that it certainly has set you back in terms of your educational opportunities. You've had to catch up and doing things a little later. Can you give us some other examples of how you think that experience as a very young girl, 12 to 16, has affected your development, your psychology, your mental health today?

Ms Jezan As I said, we were fortunate to be able to go to school and to have that little bit of support at school and also the visitors that we used to get at the detention centre were extremely helpful. It didn't affect me because I came out of it very quickly, but again it affected my parents, and for me to see it now it still upsets me till today, because my dad has still suffered from it. My mum has to deal with it, has to suffer with it as well, so this is impacting me still till today and it makes me very angry because of what we went through.

President Can you tell us a little bit about how the staff treated you in Villawood?

Ms Jezan Some were extremely nice and some were just doing their jobs and trying to get paid. The ones that tried to get paid doing their job and get paid for it were very rude. There were some extremely rude and some people [*inaudible*] where this were again, the people that won't knock the door, will come inside knowing that there is a family in there at three in the morning, and this is again something that I keep thinking about, the lack of security in there. You are locked up with a lot of barbed wires around you, however once inside you don't have the privacy in your own room.

President Did you feel that you had much support from your own religious group within the Australian community?

Ms Jezan Yes, definitely. Our religious group is growing.

President Uhuh.

Ms Jezan Again, there's a lot have come from Iraq and Iran. So yes, we used to get a lot of support from them, but religious [*inaudible*] organise for us to get out just didn't happen. It got declined. However, we were able to go and get baptised, but we were still in detention, but that was what the community helped us get to.

President And can you tell us, and I know you've said that actually you ... the other young people that you might have been friends with, came and went fairly quickly because they were visa over-stayers and were out fairly quickly, but have you kept up with any of those young people that you knew at that time or other families?

Ms Jezan No.

President No. So you haven't really got a support network in Australia at the moment of young people whom you knew and could talk about?

Ms Jezan Yeah.

President Yeah, so you are a little isolated in that sense.

Ms Jezan In that sense yes, that is correct..

President Hmmm, and your brother is now completing his studies.

Ms Jezan My brother has completed his studies and has just started working as well, so he has caught up with his life and has done for himself as well.

President So really, in essence, you and your brother are the support for each other and you had to become adults very quickly in ensuring that your parents were not distressed by your own concerns?

Ms Jezan Exactly.

President Yes. Well I'm sure that everybody listening to your evidence is pleased to see you today as a prospective lawyer working in this field and I think we wish you every good fortune. Thank you very much for giving this evidence.

Ms Jezan Thank you.