

SYDNEY PEN WRITERS IN DETENTION COMMITTEE 2003-2006

Since the turn of this century Australia has developed an iniquitous system to deal with asylum seekers. Interception of the boats in which they arrive (the most infamous example being the Tampa incident in 2001), mandatory detention of sometimes over six years for those who do arrive and forced deportation for many make up an alarming tally of practices contravening the UNHCR's Detention Guidelines. This was reported with some concern during a recent meeting of the UNHCR Executive Committee in Geneva, and has prompted Human Rights Watch to name Australia as one of the major offenders in its treatment of refugees.

As a result of these human rights abuses, PEN Sydney set up a Writers in Detention committee in February 2003, made up of Rosie Scott and Tom Keneally. Our intention was to help those writers who were detained in the Australian camps in any way we could - by local representation, publicity and by referral to International PEN when we believed they were at risk. This committee formalised work already being done by PEN members in the preceding years: organisation of a two-page ad in a national daily with 3,000 signatures of notable Australians protesting this policy (not officially backed by PEN at the time, but put together by five PEN members) events like the Day of the Imprisoned Writer in 2001 being entirely given over to the plight of refugees in Australia, with speakers including Ariel Dorfman, and The Empty Chair for a Villawood inmate Dr Aamer Sultan. Another Empty Chair was organised by PEN at a lecture by John Ralston Saul for Cheikh Kone, the Ivory Coast journalist imprisoned in Port Hedland and deemed a writer at risk by PEN International. Melbourne PEN was the prime mover in this case, but we were able to work closely with them and arrange publicity such as newspaper articles and radio interviews to help his eventual release.

Since its formation the Writers in Detention had many successes including the release of Lam Khy Try and his wife. Lam was a Cambodian journalist forced to flee for his life after his articles exposing corruption earned him a death threat from the Hun Sen government. In spite of numerous applications and appeals he and his wife remained incarcerated in Villawood with the ever-present threat of forced deportation for three years. With the work of Sydney PEN, other Australian activists, Cathy McCann of International PEN Writers in Prison Committee and other international organisations including Human Rights Watch and Journalists Without Borders, the French government finally agreed to accept Lam and his wife in February 2004.

Official Sydney PEN letters of support to many refugee writers in their applications for release were sent on behalf of the Writers in Detention Committee, and on a personal level, we have kept contact and on going support with the refugee writers now living in Sydney. One of our most notable committee projects was the publication of an anthology of refugee writing called *Another Country*, guest edited by Rosie Scott and Tom Keneally on behalf of Sydney PEN which was launched in May 23 2007. An important aspect of the work of the anthology was the tracking down of those asylum-seekers who had been 'called to write' while in the camps.

They became writers in an urgent attempt to communicate their situation to the outside world and on a personal level to express their suffering and despair. Tony Zandavar, an extremely talented poet serving in Port Hedland and Hassan Sabbagh at Villawood were good examples of this. We were very pleased with the extraordinarily powerful writing we received from the writers. In the words of David Malouf:

'Listening to these voices is like looking into a mirror. They come not from strangers but from men and women who are already fellow citizens, closely and clearly recognisable, of the same world we live in.'

There has been a huge amount of interest in the anthology, the quality of the writing being described as stunning. Another important effect of the anthology is that the publishing of their work and affirmation of their talents have given the refugee writers new hope and confidence, in the terrible conditions in which they are forced to live.

We believe the mandate for PEN is very clear: where refugee writers are treated inhumanely, detained, or threatened with deportation to the repressive regimes they have escaped from, there is an obligation for us to aid them. Similarly, when freedom of information is severely curtailed as happens in the running of the Australian detention camps, this kind of censorship is also a PEN concern. We believe that a case can be made, in view of the increasingly repressive measures taken against asylum seekers in many parts of the world, with other countries signalling their attention to follow the Australian example of mandatory detention, that similar Refugee Writers committees could be set up by other PEN members in other countries.

For this work, Sydney PEN won the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Community Award in 2004.