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## Children in Detention

Thousands of children are detained around the world. Refugee, asylum seeker and migrant children are locked in prison cells, detention centres and closed camps.

Some have no parents and others are forcibly separated from their families and left alone with adults and guards, vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

### IDC Visits of Detained Children

In 2008, the IDC Secretariat visited and completed reports on detention centres in Australia, Belgium, Japan and the USA.

In Belgium, the IDC met children detained with their families who were unable to leave the centre to go to school and allowed only one hour to play outside. The playground was clearly visible from the window of the detention centre.

In the USA, the IDC met unaccompanied minors detained in juvenile correctional facilities. One child had been detained for three years in four facilities. In one centre he was assaulted by a guard and had no legal counsel. The youngest detained unaccompanied minor who the IDC met was a five-year-old girl in the Boystown facility in Florida.

In Japan, the IDC met a Burmese mother held in a detention centre. Her children had been taken from her and placed in an orphanage.

In Malaysia, the IDC met with refugee children who had been detained in harsh conditions. Others were left homeless when their parents were detained, including a seven-year-old Burmese girl who was sexually abused following the detention of her mother.

### Child Detention Project Malaysia

The IDC and Shelter, a Malaysian NGO, have developed a two-year pilot program aimed at improving the welfare of child

detainees in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The project includes the employment of a child welfare worker to work with detained children and those affected by detention, and, where possible to visit Semenyih and Lenggeng Detention Centres. The project aims to provide psychosocial, welfare and community support and referral to detention-affected children identified as being of particular vulnerability and need. No other project of this kind exists in Malaysia.

The overarching vision of the project is to provide humanitarian assistance to children affected by immigration detention, to improve overall child welfare, to provide a regular independent presence in these detention centres where possible, and to encourage policy change through demonstrating a functioning alternative.

The IDC has previously reported on the growing concerns on the use and conditions of immigration detention for refugees and migrants in Malaysia, including children and unaccompanied minors. Shelter is unique in its extensive experience working with vulnerable children and visiting prisons and juvenile facilities in Malaysia.

The IDC has sourced two years' seed funding for the project, and aims to provide ongoing support to the project in an advisory function, with Shelter playing a coordinating role in the project. The project was implemented in April 2009 with a reference committee being created and comprised of Malaysian NGO groups and UNHCR. **For more details of Shelter's work visit [www.shelterhome.org](http://www.shelterhome.org)**

*Thanks so much to the IDC for all the hard work and dedication showed on this project of detention of migrants in Malaysia. It's something that is so welcomed and needed.*

Training participant in Kuala Lumpur, November 2008.

# IDC Outcomes for Detained Children

## Malaysia

In October 2008, three Burmese refugee children in Malaysia, about to be resettled to Australia, were caught in a raid and detained in Lenggeng Detention Centre. Their mother was arrested at the same time but later released, leaving the children alone in the centre with no caregiver. Through advocacy to the Australian Government, the IDC was able to assist the release of the children from detention, who arrived in Australia in February 2009 with their mother and siblings.

## Other advocacy outcomes

Global Forum for Migration and Development (GFMD): The IDC successfully lobbied to include three of the eight IDC recommendations into the final statement to the 167 states by civil society, including recommendations to avoid detention, particularly for children and other vulnerable persons, and to develop alternatives.

US: Following the submission of the paper on the successful implementation of alternatives to detention in Australia, the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency contacted the Australian Government for further details of these developments in May 2009.

The IDC will further lobby its paper in Washington, as well as in Europe in the fall of 2009.

## Belgium

The IDC has impacted the development of alternatives to detention for children and families in Belgium, as well as the conditions in detention. The IDC visited the 127bis Detention Centre on June 20, 2008, and provided a report to the Belgian Government on a number of concerns regarding the regime, conditions and best interests of the children detained. On February 25, 2009, the IDC received a letter from the Immigration Minister, Annemie Turtelboom stating that: '*concerning your observations about the 127bis detention centre, my administration has reserved budget to better contribute to the humanization of the detention centre*'.

Following three days of IDC and member meetings with Government and Departmental Officers in Belgium on the issue of alternatives to detaining children, in June 2008, the Belgian media made the following report: "The Belgian Minister of Migration and Asylum, Annemie Turtelboom, said after a meeting on 20 June with Grant Mitchell, an Australian expert from the International Detention Coalition, that the current year is the 'last year during which children might be detained in closed centres for irregular immigrants'. The Minister showed interest for the Australian model of dealing with irregular immigration and indicated she was examining it with the aim to adapt it to Belgium in the coming months."<sup>4</sup>

In October 2008 the Belgian Government announced that children irregularly in the country would not be detained, but would be brought with their families to open housing accompanied by a coach. The pilot was introduced that month and has since assisted more than 40 children, with an average age of six, who would have previously been detained. While there are considerable improvements needed in the model, it has seen a significant shift in government policy and a reduction in the number of detained children.

Similar meetings held with members and governments about the successful Australian model are organized for 2009 in the UK, USA and EU member states.

4. <http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/72-56-18807/refugies-plus-d-enfants-enfermes-l-annee-prochaine.html>

# 2010

The IDC has a busy year ahead in its work to assist detained children, to improve conditions and promote alternatives to detention. This includes:

Launch and implement global *Child Detention Campaign*.

Launch and lobby the *Handbook on Implementing Alternatives to Detention*.

Develop and implement regional training and capacity-building initiatives in Southern Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central America.