

Immigration

detention centres

under review

The first activity of 2000 for the Joint Standing Committee on Migration, chaired by Mrs Chris Gallus MP, was to inspect the recently established immigration detention centre at Woomera. The visit afforded the members of the Committee a valuable opportunity to gain first hand information on the conditions and services available to the 898 illegal immigrants housed there.

The former Defence facility at Woomera has been converted to accommodate the unprecedented levels of unauthorised arrivals. Statistics published by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (*Protecting the Border: Immigration Compliance*) reveal that the number of boat arrivals jumped dramatically in 1998-99 to 926 arrivals compared with 157 in 1997-98. Since July 1999 the number has increased even more dramatically to more than 3,000 arrivals. Consequently, existing detention centres have filled to capacity and the immigration detention centre was opened at Woomera in late November 1999.

The Committee's visit to Woomera is part of a wider program of inspections of detention centres. In November last year, the Committee inspected the Perth Immigration Detention Centre, the Immigration Processing and Reception Centre at Port Hedland and the facilities established at the air force base at Curtin (near Derby) which are operated by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The Committee also visited the detention centres at Willie Creek (Broome) and Darwin which are managed by the Australian Fisheries Management Authority. The latter are normally used for illegal fishermen but they are also used to process unauthorised arrivals. This year the Committee has visited the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre in Sydney and the Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre in Melbourne.

The Committee has had a long-standing interest in immigration detention centres. In 1993, under the chairmanship of the current deputy chair, Senator Jim McKiernan, it investigated the complex issues relevant to immigration detention in Australia. As part of that inquiry the Committee inspected the centres at Port Hedland, Perth and Villawood. The report of the inquiry, entitled *Asylum, Border Control and Detention (February 1994)*, provided a comprehensive and detailed analysis of law and practice relating to immigration detention centres and the Committee's observations on the centres.

In September 1997, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs entered into contractual arrangements with Australasian Correctional Services Pty Limited (ACS). The contract

related to the provision of detention, transfer and removal services at all immigration detention centres throughout Australia. The Committee was interested to inspect the centres shortly after the service delivery arm of ACS, Australian Correctional Management, assumed control of these functions. It embarked upon a series of visits to Perth, Port Hedland, Villawood and Maribyrnong in April, May and June 1998. In addition, the Chair and Deputy Chair made separate inspections of the detention facility at Willie Creek.

In 1998 the Committee observed and sought information on a range of aspects of the detention centres, including buildings, health and welfare services, education facilities, religious and recreational services, food and interpreting services and complaint procedures. Notwithstanding the overcrowding in the Perth Detention Centre at the time of its visit and problems encountered at Willie Creek, the Committee considered that the facilities were adequate and the services of an appropriate standard. Nonetheless the Committee determined to maintain a monitoring role.

The dramatic increase in the number of arrivals in recent months and the consequent establishment of the detention centres at Curtin and Woomera gave impetus to the timing of the Committee's current program of inspections. Members were able to assess the impact of the influx on the Perth and Port Hedland facilities since their previous visit and to familiarise themselves with the new arrangements at Curtin.

The Committee's visit to Willie Creek coincided with the arrival of an Indonesian boat carrying 75 illegal immigrants, which was towed into the vicinity of Broome by the patrol boat HMAS WOLLONGONG. This chance arrival enabled the Committee to observe closely initial entry processing procedures, from the transfer of the passengers to shore by small dinghies to their departure by coach for the detention centre at Curtin. While at Willie Creek the Committee also noted the situation of fishermen detained pending court hearings for illegally fishing in Australian waters.

As in Broome illegal fishermen detained at Darwin remain on their vessels during their period of detention. The Committee took to the water to inspect at close quarters two fishing boats detained in the quarantined mooring area in Darwin harbour. A caretaker contracted to the Australian Fisheries Management Authority provides fresh water, food and other commodities to the boats. However, proposals for an onshore detention facility are currently under consideration. While in Darwin the Committee visited the site identified for this development on the perimeter of the harbour.

A particularly illuminating experience for members of the Committee was an unscheduled inspection of an Indonesian ferry that was anchored in Darwin harbour awaiting disposal. The vessel had carried 352 unauthorised arrivals to Ashmore Reef where it had been apprehended the previous week.

A detailed report of the Committee's observations and conclusions will be presented to the Parliament in the near future.