

AUSTRALIA: Secretary General Irene Khan meets Minister Philip Ruddock

Sydney: At a meeting today with Australia's Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs Minister, Philip Ruddock, Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan raised the issues of mandatory detention of asylum seekers, the "Pacific solution" and returns to Afghanistan.

Irene Khan welcomed the ongoing dialogue and assurances from the Minister that he takes Amnesty International's interventions very seriously.

Ms Khan urged the Minister to review the policy of mandatory detention for unauthorised arrivals to bring it in line with international human rights standards. She said that detention should be the exception and not the rule, and should always be independently reviewable.

"Serious efforts to explore alternatives to detention, particularly for vulnerable asylum seekers, families with children, must be a top priority for the government," Ms Khan said. "Despite the Minister's assurances that detention was not meant to be punitive, we remain concerned about the psychological and physical impact, especially on children."

She expressed concern about the length of detention, particularly given the information from the Minister that security clearance may take longer due to inadequate resources.

Regarding the Australian government's "Pacific solution", the Minister accepted that Australia is responsible for the welfare of asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island but was reluctant to give any specific indication of how it would resolve these cases.

"After six months of detention on Nauru and Manus Island, the asylum seekers will be getting very anxious about their future. Every effort should be made to avoid a repeat of the frustration which led to the kind of disturbances we saw in Woomera," Ms Khan said.

Ms Khan also asked the Minister to allow independent monitoring, and access for lawyers, non-government organisations and media.

The prospect of visiting Woomera and Manus Island detention centres was also raised. The Minister promised to give consider positively Amnesty's request to visit these centres.

On the situation of Afghan asylum seekers in Australia and the Pacific, Ms Khan stressed that there must be substantial change in Afghanistan before repatriation is considered. The Minister assured Ms Khan that all repatriation would be voluntary and that pending cases would continue to be processed. He welcomed Amnesty International information on the human rights situation in Afghanistan.

The Secretary General also relayed the concerns of indigenous groups she met with yesterday, in particular that the

Minister is unable to give adequate attention to indigenous issues because of demands from his other portfolios.

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