Non-Muslims `stoned, abused and degraded' at Woomera

Russell Skelton

Christians and non-Muslim minorities have been stoned, assaulted, sexually harassed and abused by Islamic fanatics inside Woomera, detention centre employees and pastoral care workers say.

In one incident, a Christian from Iran known as Reza was partially blinded when Afghan detainees stoned Christians leaving the dining mess.

In another incident, it is claimed that a blind man of the Sabian Mandaeae faith was grabbed by a group of men, held down and defecated on. He was allegedly left locked in a toilet where he was found by moderate Muslims who freed him. The man's wife has since been harassed.

According to workers and care providers at Woomera, who have asked not to be named for fear of being sacked or denied access to detainees, the stoning of Christians took place in August and despite an investigation by Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), no action has been taken against those responsible.
Mandaeans are a tiny pre-Christian sect who follow the teachings of John the Baptist. Many have come to Australia seeking asylum after escaping persecution in Iran and Iraq.

In other recent incidents at Woomera it is claimed that:

· Mandaean girls are harassed by Muslim men who see them as "infidels" not worthy of respect.

· Muslims have defecated in the doorways of Mandaean quarters.

· Non-Muslim women are abused for not wearing veils.

· A Christian man was kicked to the floor of the dining mess and had a cross ripped from his neck.

Refugee coordinator for Amnesty International, Graham Thom, said yesterday that Amnesty had received several allegations about the treatment of Mandaeans in detention.

"We take these reports very seriously and we have asked the government to ensure that Mandaeans who fear for their safety are properly protected," he said. "They should also be free to practise their religion." Dr Thom said Amnesty had asked Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock to consider relocating Mandaeans at Woomera, Curtin and Port Hedland to Sydney's Villawood detention centre, where they could be protected and receive community pastoral care.

A spokesman for Mr Ruddock confirmed yesterday that there had been a conflict at Woomera in August involving "about a dozen" detainees in which a man was injured. He said police were investigating, but he had been told the clash between detainees was based on politics and not religion.

A former ACM employee told The Age that the accused leader of the August attack, an Afghan, was now living in Queensland on a temporary protection visa.

Mr Ruddock said he was concerned about acts of violence and inappropriate behaviour in detention centres and steps had been taken to separate troublemakers. But the Immigration Department did not have a "coercive regime" and could only refer such incidents to the police.

He said the Mandaeans would not be moved to Villawood because of "operational" reasons but they could be isolated from the rest of the detainee population if that was their request.

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