Baptism of fire for believers

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**Abstract:** Mandaeans who fled persecution in Iran say life in Australia's detention centres is filled with religious hatred against non-Muslims. Barney Zwartz reports.

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_Perspective_

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Barney Zwartz
Two photos: Members of the Sabian Mandaean Association of Sydney at the Nepean River, west of Sydney.

Mandaeans who fled persecution in Iran say life in Australia's detention centres is filled with religious hatred against non-Muslims. Barney Zwartz reports.

An Iranian family who fled to Australia after their eight-year-old daughter was raped suffered such religious persecution at the Woomera detention centre that all four were admitted to hospital with psychiatric problems.

Australasian Correctional Management, which ran the centre, asked the Immigration Department to transfer the Sabian Mandaean family to escape torment by Muslim detainees, and to be close to critically needed psychiatric treatment.

The Age understands that ACM told the department the family was peaceful and did not take
part in disturbances at the centre, which earned them further persecution. Urine was thrown on them, they weren't allowed to use facilities, and other residents entered their room late at night to taunt the family.

ACM said the family - which is believed to have been transferred to Melbourne's Maribyrnong centre - were too scared to report the persecution.

Complaints compiled by The Age suggest that while the family's experience is extreme, religious hatred is a fact of life in detention centres.

An Immigration Department spokeswoman said she could not comment on individual cases, but "allegations of persecution are taken very seriously by the department and are investigated. To date, no claims have been substantiated." She could not say how many had been investigated.

But complaints to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the testimony of clergy who visit the centres suggest that Christians and other minority groups face persistent harassment and abuse by Muslim extremists, and management indifference to their religious needs.

According to representatives outside the centres, Christians, Tamils and Sabian Mandaeans (followers of John the Baptist) in the centres live in fear.

Elizabeth Kendal, principal researcher and writer for the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission, points out that many Mandaean and Christian refugees who enter Australia without visas are finding themselves locked up in "enclosed microcosms of the hostile environments they fled".

"It is not uncommon to find that in nations such as Australia, where religious tolerance is considered a virtue, talk of religious intolerance is not tolerated. As such, stories of religious persecution do not impress governments that have no desire to get involved in politically incorrect issues," she says.

The Human Rights Commission is following up a series of complaints referred to it by Amnesty International on behalf of Mandaeans, including an attempted rape and several assaults.

Mandaeans have claimed Muslims would not allow them to mingle or use facilities and forced them to conform to Muslim dress codes. They also have to eat food prepared to Muslim religious requirements, which contradict their own. Having fled Islamic persecution, these groups find it humiliating to have to conform to Islamic dietary laws in Australia.

Mandaeans say Muslim extremists have defecated on them, and set fire to Mandaean and Christian accommodation when these groups don't join planned disturbances. Mandaeans say an extremist religious leader in detention has issued a "fatwa" that killing Mandaeans is sanctioned in Islam.

Amnesty International, which has taken up the case of hundreds of detainees, suggests
"The authorities are basically indifferent to religion," says John Clugston from Amnesty's national refugee team. "They regard it as a nuisance, and there is also an overall view that, within limits, detainees can do what they like to each other. They hope that if they do nothing, it may persuade individual Mandaeans, Tamils and Christians to go home."

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock says not every incident between different groups in detention is based on religious grounds. "Some of it is just personal, and there is a lot of counselling by the department," he says.

The spokesman says many of the complaints are exaggerated, even outlandish, and others are made months after the event. "Quite often the allegation bears a resemblance to reality, but not necessarily an accurate resemblance."

But the president of the Sabian Mandaeaan Association, Khosrow Chohaili, says: "What we are saying is from letters from detainees to us. They are in a very bad situation. They are crying. All we can do is speak out and ask the government to act.

"No one cares, I can tell you. We are a very small community, we have no voice."

He says that although the government denies that the Mandaeans face harassment in detention, the fact that they have been moved together at Baxter, separated from Muslims, is a tacit acknowledgment. There are 67 Mandaeans in detention, mostly children.

Many clergy who visit detention centres say the centre management and guards often make Christian worship difficult.

Some believe the restrictions on worship may breach Australia's constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion, let alone the Detention Standards Document, which carries a similar guarantee.

Complaints range from frequent and apparently arbitrary restriction and cancellation of church services, up to attempts to discourage Muslims from converting to Christianity and prohibiting or delaying baptisms.

Christians and Mandaeans are forced to comply with various Islamic religious observances, especially with regard to food.

The Reverend Andrew Ford, who has just moved to Sydney after 18 months as assistant Anglican priest in Broome, says Curtin management was obstructionist.

"The excuse was `operational concerns', but they would never give details. Sometimes they would cancel at very short notice. Curtin is 200 kilometres from Broome, and they would only let me come on Saturday or Sunday.

"We weren't allowed to meet as a single group (there were some 70 Christians in a centre population of 650), but only in groups of 20 or less. There wasn't anywhere in the camp
where Christians could meet securely without persecution from the rest of the camp. When they tried they were surrounded, and people threw things at the Christians. We had to meet outside, sometimes in 40-degree heat with very little shade, or in the rain. "One incident particularly disturbed Ford, when centre management posted the names of the Christians on a bulletin board. Within minutes it had been taken down by Muslims, some of whom began to harass the Christians.

"They said, `we're going to contact the authorities in Iran. When you get home we've got proof you were involved in Christian things'."

Other harassment, according to Ford, includes being roughed up, bullied, and being excluded from general areas such as the TV room. "It's low-level, very hard to prove. (The Immigration Department) and ACM would never admit it was religiously motivated."

Several ministers report that Immigration and ACM constantly denied any problems. Father John Murphy of the Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office wrote on behalf of Mandaeans being harassed by Muslim extremists at Woomera.

He received a reply four months later from Multicultural Affairs Minister Gary Hardgrave saying these were old allegations that had been thoroughly investigated and proved unfounded. Hardgrave questioned the motives of those who raised them.

The Reverend Andrew Watts, Uniting Church minister at Kununurra, WA, says the Curtin management had various excuses for keeping him out.

"In the end I didn't believe any of them. For example, they'd say they had to wait for the result of a Refugee Review Tribunal hearing before a detainee could be baptised, or it had to go to the minister's office for approval. At other times they were concerned that so many Muslims were trying to convert - they thought they were trying to improve their chances of winning a case, which may have been true for some."

Watts says detainees, moved from Curtin to Port Hedland, told him that at Curtin it was the law of the jungle. ACM and the Immigration Department "at the end kept out of things. The inmates did what they liked, which means the bullies did what they liked."

The Reverend John Jegasothy, Uniting Church minister at Dulwich Hill, Sydney, says Tamils live in constant fear of Muslim extremists at Villawood. "It's such a Muslim community, and just a few Tamils sitting in the corner. They can worship on their own in front of a picture, but when they come out as a group, the Middle Eastern people don't like it. They say they are worshipping idols."

Also at Villawood, a Catholic bishop was allegedly forced to remove his cross before he was allowed in.

In Port Hedland, Tamils complain that they were refused biscuits and soft drinks to celebrate the Hindu festival of lights, though both were regularly supplied to Muslim and Catholic detainees.
Also at Port Hedland, Christians had a long struggle to obtain a prayer room for Catholics, Protestants, Assyrian Christians, Mandaeans and Hindus, though Muslims have had a mosque there for years.

One minister was refused entry to Port Hedland for a service that had been previously arranged. The detainees were told the minister had phoned to say he was sick. He discovered the lie when detainees wrote to say they hoped he was getting better.

Barney Zwartz is The Age's religious affairs writer.

WHO ARE THE MANDAEANS?

Sabian Mandaeans trace their tradition to John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. Many fled east from Israel when Rome crushed a rebellion there in AD70, and are now based mainly around the border of Iraq and Iran.

There are only 50,000 Mandaeans worldwide, some 2000 of whom are in Sydney. There are 67 in detention, mostly children.

Their religion requires prayer three times a day, repeated baptisms in a fresh-water river, and involves rigorous dietary requirements. Their sacred writings are the Ginza, or Treasury.

Mandaeans say they are particularly persecuted in Iran, so much so that the community may be extinct in two generations.