

Woomera Detention Centre

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Date Entered: 2005-05-04

Description One of six detention centres in Australia at the time, Woomera was established in 1999 to detain the growing number of illegal entrants and asylum seekers while their applications for refugee status were processed. The policy of mandatory detention had been introduced by the Hawke Labor government in 1991. In the wake of 9/11, concerns about border protection in the war on terrorism translated into a new wave of popular and political support in Australia for the policy, until publicized human rights violations at Woomera shifted the weight of public opinion and led to its closure.

The centre was located approximately 475 km north of South Australia's capital city of Adelaide, at the edge of a military test site, the Woomera Prohibited Area. The hot, dry, isolated desert location, as well as the long periods of internment (between several months and three or more years) exacerbated the difficult conditions of detainment. After the news that some applications had been frozen following the overthrow of Afghanistan's Taliban government in November 2001, the threat that applicants would be sent back to their home countries fuelled protests at Woomera and brought international attention to their situation.

Media reports and video footage of detainees leaping onto barbed-wire fences, refusing to eat, hanging themselves, and sewing their lips closed horrified and divided the Australian public, while the government took a hardline stance — the behaviour of the detainees was described by Prime Minister John Howard as "moral intimidation."

An independent group appointed by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock (who had also been critical of the behaviour of the detainees) reported in 2001 that a culture of self-harm, depression, and anxiety posed a serious threat to the detainees. After criticisms of the camp's conditions by the United Nations in 2002 and news reports of the use of indiscriminate tear gas by federal police, the centre was closed in April 2003.