

Two Indonesian Boys in an Australian Prison

Indonesian boys were jailed with adult prisoners in an Australian prison. It has been months since they were arrested as criminals in the country. Their road to freedom is complicated.

"I was placed in the same cell as a foreigner (Australian citizen). He was a big man; he used drugs like marijuana. I knew what it was from its look," said Andri (not his real name).

For Andri, sharing a cell in Silverwater Prison in Sydney, Australia with a criminal was scary.

At that time, Andri was 16 years old. He was put behind bars in Australia after being caught smuggling immigrants from the Middle East to Christmas Island in October of 2010. He was jailed in a temporary prison on the island.

He was under 16 then, and had a difficult journey ahead. He was interviewed by the Australian immigration officers several times on Christmas Island, and eventually in an immigration detention house in Darwin, Australia. He was held for three months in Darwin after he confessed to being under the age of 18.

The Australian officials had a different way of determining his age – in Darwin, Andri had the palms of his hands and bottoms of his feet x-rayed to confirm his age. The result showed that he was an adult.

In March 2011, he was transferred to Silverwater Prison in Sydney. The prison holds Australian criminals and illegal immigrants, as well as adult boat crews from Indonesia. Trials to determine his age were conducted through a video link during his time there.

Upon arrival, Andri had to stay in a dark room alone for ten days. After that, he was placed in Block 11, Port 8 with other Indonesians.

Unfortunately, there was a constant threat of being transferred from Block 11, Port 8, to Block 14. All the while, Andri was being treated as an adult and both blocks were designated to hold adults.

When he was eventually moved to Block 14, he met his Australian cellmate. "He offered me cigarettes, I took them. But when it was drugs, I refused," he admitted.

Andri was he was offered a job sewing blankets in the prison and was paid five Australian dollars, a good income in prison. The job didn't make his life easier though; he had to be searched several times by prison officers. The searches required him to remove all of his clothing and officers frequently mocked him for having small genitalia. He had no choice but to take it.

In July of 2011, the court confirmed that Andri was indeed underage. It was his ticket to freedom. Following the verdict, he was moved to an immigration prison in Villawood, Sydney in December of 2011, before he returned to Indonesia.

Indra's experience was similar. He was the same age as Andri when he was arrested by Australian border patrols in December of 2010 for smuggling eight illegal immigrants. X-ray scans showed Indra's age was 18 to 19 years old.

He was transferred to Silverwater where was placed in a closed block for criminal prisoners, Darsi 1 and later Darsi 10. He spoke limited English which he used to communicate with fellow prisoners, including several Pakistani prisoners he met there. Speaking in a foreign language is what Indra remembers most, including the harsh words commonly used by Australian prisoners; "many swore 'fuck-fuck'."

Indra and the Pakistanis were able to join an English class, but Indra did not end up joining the class in favour of using other facilities available at the prison, including the library. He was unable to read much though, because all of the books were in English.

During his time at the immigration prison in Darwin, he was able to use a number of facilities including the library, sport facilities, arts and more. "I made an airbrushed shirt which I keep as a souvenir. For sports, they had a golf course, bowling, and more. It had complete facilities," he said.

His freedom was granted after the charges against him were withdrawn in December 2011 because Indra was underage. He was brought back to Indonesia through Bali, alongside Andri.

Indra remembers other underage boys from Indonesia who are still being detained in Australia. He said that he was transferred to Darwin from Christmas Island together with three other underage children. "They called them 3 babies. It means there are Indonesian boys there," he explained.

Indra and Andri's lawyer, Lisa Hiariej, said there are still 36 children in prison in Australia. She is worried that these children are being detained as adults for an extended period.

Her concern encourages her to keep looking for information. She has actively protested the use of x-ray scans to determine age because that system has been frequently inaccurate.

"Andri and Indra were eventually released, although x-ray scans showed that they were adults. I pity them," she said.

The Indonesian Foreign Ministry didn't deny the presence of Indonesian children behind bars in Australia. Their records show a number of Indonesian children have been arrested in Australia. The government is currently making efforts to free them.

The Ministry confirmed that the Australian government also used boat crew documents to determine their ages. These documents include birth and school certificates.

"I can assure you that these documents are recognized. They tend to categorize those in gray ages such as 18 or 19 as children," said the Ministry's spokesperson, Michael Tene.

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