Detention practices have improved, writes Michelle Dimasi, and it’s time for the government to take the next step.
jungle landscape that looks like something from *Jurassic Park*, and constant conversations about ridiculous food prices (nine dollars will buy you half a red cabbage). Fascinating Christmas Island may be, but it is not a great place for community detention.

One problem is transport. Facilities on the island are dispersed and the island is quite hilly. Red Cross makes available transport to essential places such as the doctor and the supermarket, but otherwise community detainees – men, women and children – must hitch rides with locals or walk in the sweltering tropical heat. The island does have a community bus but it only travels a few times a day: someone catching the bus from Drumsite neighbourhood (where the families are detained) to go to the pharmacy or post office in Settlement must leave at 9.30am and wait until 12.30pm for another bus.

Boredom is another problem. When I spent time with the families from both of the 2008 boats they would constantly tell me about the boredom they were experiencing. There are no local volunteer or community organisations to organise activities for the asylum seekers. They do not receive enough money to pay for recreational activities. Hopefully, this issue will be resolved with Red Cross’ decision to send a recreational officer to the island in January.

Detention problems on Christmas Island are not confined to community arrangements. In response to the increase in the number of boat arrivals the new $400 million maximum-security detention centre became operational in December. Christmas Island is already over 2000 km from mainland Australia, but the centre itself is situated at North West Point, a remote location even by island standards. It takes twenty minutes to drive from the island centre along dodgy roads that are mostly unbituminised and contain potholes. It can be a dangerous drive during the wet season. Until last weekend, no one from the local community had made a social visit to the boat people detained there, partly because of the centre’s location and partly because people are unsure whether social visits are allowed. It is unlikely the detainees will receive visits from mainlanders when flights to the island cost around $2000. The only people detainees interact with are the fly-in, fly-out processing and detention staff who arrive on the weekly charter flight, which – according to testimony before a parliamentary committee this week – costs $70,000 every time it operates.

According to Hakim, who was one of the first asylum seekers to experience living at North West Point, told me that the new centre feels like a prison. The only difference between North West Point and jail was that “we were not handcuffed.” He found the constant camera surveillance and electronically controlled doors intimidating: it felt “like I was in a cage.” Hakim, who recently resettled on the mainland, also told me that he was depressed for most of the time he spent in the centre. Hakim is confused as to why asylum seekers are treated this way. “We come here to be safe, we are not criminals,” he said. He feels that people would become clinically depressed, if locked up at North West Point for too long.

As I was saying goodbye at the airport I suggested to several refugees that their recent experiences were like the chapters of a book. The terrible chapters in Afghanistan had passed, the Christmas Island chapter was approaching its last few pages, and their new life in Adelaide was the happy ending. Perhaps this analogy extends to Australia’s asylum seeker policy. The dark chapter during the Howard years is closed. The Christmas Island chapter is still open, and shows no sign of closing following the department’s decision to use the facility to detain Australia’s newest asylum seekers, fifty-four boatpeople intercepted last week. It will not be until Labor stops community detention on Christmas Island, closes the maximum-security detention centre and moves people to the mainland for processing, that Australia’s asylum seeker policy can humanely enter its next chapter. •