Reportage:
A routine removal

Reporter:
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It is a cold winter evening and the visitors’ lounge at the Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre feels like the waiting room of a forlorn hospital, a place where you sit anticipating news that can only be bad. A few children’s drawings are sticky-taped to the besser-brick walls. Scuffed vending machines in the corner offer soft-drinks and snacks. The combination of antiseptic, pale blue paint, institutional steel chairs and strip fluoro lighting makes the room cold, even though the heating is up high.

I hear the family before I see them, children asking questions in a corridor behind curtained windows, the deep but muffled voice of an adult answering. When a guard unlocks the door that gives access to the detention centre proper, Karoline greets me and invites me to sit. We have never met before but she has an ease that belies the strained circumstances. Her voice adds warmth to the bleak surroundings.

Karoline is in her mid-thirties and is as talkative and animated as her husband, Jone, is taciturn and pensive. He shakes my hand politely in a soft Pacific Island way, at odds with his size and obvious strength. Jone lets Karoline do the talking as he cradles their year-old baby Sally, who wriggles in his giant arms. Four-year-old Felise is also restless: she plays with the visiting room’s odd assortment of broken toys, then darts between us and other huddled groups of detainees and their visitors inside, and in the smokers’ courtyard. Felise is greeted affectionately, sometimes offered sweets or snacks, but successfully ducks attempts to tousle her untamed curls. Her restlessness is an indication of the struggle to keep three kids occupied day in, day out. Karoline says the detention centre is ‘a pressure cooker’ and after three weeks inside the family is ‘just keeping a lid on things’. Only the eldest, Penaia, manages to stay more or less still. He sits between me and his parents, legs swinging incessantly beneath his chair, listening attentively to the adult talk. Penaia is six and in his first year of school. A few more years in Australia and he could have been the family’s passport to permanent residency and citizenship.

I came to Maribyrnong bearing gifts of fresh fruit – scarce in the detention centre – and sweets to brighten the kids’ day. I am not permitted to give my presents to the family. The guards at the security desk tell me to label the plastic bags with the
family’s name in black texta. The bags will be checked and then given to Karoline and Jone after I leave. My mobile phone and wallet are also not allowed inside – I put them in a metal locker and sign in.

On the form, I declare I am a family friend. This is not strictly true. I’ve been ‘introduced’ to Karoline and Jone by a mutual acquaintance and have come to the detention centre to ask them about their lives as undocumented migrants – *illegals* – living in Australia. At the outset, I feel compelled to remind them that I cannot pull strings with the Immigration Department or conjure miracles with migration lawyers. I don’t want to raise false hopes. All I can offer is to tell their story. They accept this. Karoline knows I have been researching the feasibility of a seasonal workers scheme to allow Pacific Islanders to travel to Australia on short-term visas to pick fruit or do other horticultural jobs. This is the thread that connects us – despite her unlawful status Karoline had helped a Fijian group in Melbourne prepare a submission for a Senate inquiry, with detailed plans for a pilot seasonal work program in Shepparton. The idea won initial backing from the ACTU, before Australian Workers’ Union leader and aspiring politician Bill Shorten denounced ‘guest worker’ schemes as ‘exploitative of the guest and exploitative of unemployed Australians’. The idea of seasonal work – of Pacific Islanders coming to and from Australia for some months each year – is something Karoline has thought about a lot. Gesturing at the cold blue walls she says: ‘If you had a scheme like that then you wouldn’t need a place like this.’

The family is in detention while they wait for new passports to be issued in Fiji. The bureaucratic wheels in Suva turn slowly, especially because Penaia, Felise and Sally were born in Australia. Forms must be filled in, declarations made, birth certificates obtained and sent. Unlike some other immigration detainees, Karoline and Jone are not putting up a fight to stay – they know this would only prolong time in the pressure cooker. They accept that they have no choice but to return to Fiji.

Karoline and Jone have a compelling reason to go home: to be reunited with their oldest children, Timi and Anna, who were born before they left Fiji, have never met their Australian-born siblings, and have not seen their parents for almost ten years. When they left Fiji in 1994, two-year-old Timi and eight-month-old Anna stayed with grandparents. The couple did not intend to be away long. They arrived in Sydney and headed for the Riverina town of Griffith to pick fruit and make as much quick money as they could. They wanted to pay off debts from building a house and planned to go home to Karoline’s low-paid job as a teacher when their six-week tourist visas expired. Things worked out rather differently.

Karoline and Jone soon realised that they could not save money as quickly as they had hoped. Picking oranges was more difficult than anticipated. They were paid by volume and it took time to learn the ropes and to become adept at filling the bins. ‘I’ve never worked so hard in all my life,’ says Karoline. ‘And it was so hot. I’m not used to the dry heat.’
At times they found themselves working in dust storms that turned their skin white and their hair grey. Without a car, a cousin would drive them out before starting his 5.30 am shift at the chicken factory back in town. This meant that Jone and Karoline would be in the orchards before sunrise, and spend hours slapping away mosquitoes before the working day began.

After six weeks they had not saved enough to repay the cost of their trip, and managed to extend their visitor visas for six weeks. Meanwhile Fijian friends were suggesting another option – they urged Karoline and Jone to apply for refugee status. This would buy them more time in Australia and provide them with the legal right to work while their applications were processed. At first Karoline and Jone were reluctant: to work in Australia for a few months in breach of their visa conditions was one thing; to make a dubious refugee application in order to extend their stay was another. And it would mean more time away from their children, Timi and Anna.

Uncertain about what to do, they considered splitting up; Karoline would go back to the children and her teaching job in Fiji, while Jone would stay, work and send money home. Friends cautioned against this. They warned it would end in disaster. Jone might get lonely and start a new family in Australia. Their marriage could fall apart. It had happened before to plenty of others. Being the outgoing and articulate partner, the one who handled officialdom and filled in the forms, Karoline also worried how Jone would manage alone. She feared he would land in trouble with the authorities if left him to fend for himself.

The couple continued to agonise about the decision, but as the expiry of their visas approached, they followed their friends’ advice and engaged the services of a migration agent. He took all the cash that they had put aside in Australia so far – around $500 – and demanded a further $800 once they saved some more. In return he helped them apply for refugee status, filling in the forms for a pro-forma application for a protection visa – forms which, according to the Immigration Department, are ‘designed to avoid any need for an applicant to use professional advisers to assist them’ – and paying the lodgement fee (disparagingly labelled a ‘$30 work visa’ by former Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock).²

Karoline did not like or trust the migration agent, but there was no pretence about the business arrangement they had entered into. It was as clear to the migration agent as it was to Karoline and Jone that they did not have legitimate claim to be recognised as refugees.

Once their applications were in the system and under consideration, they were legally entitled to work in Australia. With no children to care for, they devoted themselves to earning and saving. The Griffith cousin helped them get jobs on the production line at the chicken factory. Process work was better: there were no seasonal breaks between crops, no days lost to bad weather and there was still the option of extra work in the orchards. Karoline and Jone would clock on at the chicken
factory at 5.30 am and knock off at two in the afternoon. After a short break they would head out to the orchards to pick fruit or prune until it got dark. In summer it was normal to work thirteen or fourteen hours a day, six days a week, with one day off at the weekend for rest and church.

Working two jobs, the couple quickly paid off their debt to the migration agent and began to send a significant proportion of their wages home. The money was more than enough to support their two children and the grandparents who were caring for them. The surplus was shared with the extended family. The money flowing from Australia funded Jone’s younger brothers through high school and helped with the education of nephews, nieces and cousins. Karoline estimates that their remittances were directly supporting at least eight people and indirectly supporting many others. If there was a wedding or a funeral, the couple would be called upon to send something extra to help cover expenses. This could be $200 or more, depending on the closeness of the relative or the person’s importance in the community.

When their application for refugee status was rejected, Karoline and Jone engaged a second migration agent to help them to lodge an appeal to the Refugee Review Tribunal. No one was in any doubt about the purpose of this exercise. There was no chance that Karoline and Jone would be recognised as refugees, but the automatic right of appeal bought them more time in Australia. Karoline trusted the second agent more, but he also charged a lot of money and made mistakes, almost failing to lodge their appeal on time. When the appeal failed, the new agent took them through the next step – direct appeal to the minister asking him to exercise his discretion under Section 417 of the Migration Act to grant a visa on compassionate grounds. Again, this was to buy time in Australia.

When the appeal failed (as they knew it would), the migration agent helped them to pursue another avenue. Karoline and Jone moved to Sydney to care for a cousin who had been diagnosed with cancer. The migration agent assisted them to apply to stay as the primary carers of an invalid. Once again the family was ‘legal’, working and paying taxes as their application wound its course through bureaucracy and the legal system, gradually rejected at every stage.

In Sydney, Jone was always able to work as a labourer or process worker. Karoline also worked when she could, although in addition to the invalid relative, she now had two children to care for. Four years after arriving in Australia, Karoline gave birth to Penaia; daughter Felise came two years later. The family lived ‘hand to mouth’ so they could keep sending money back to Fiji.

When the Sydney relative passed away so did the family’s last claim to legal residency in Australia. Karoline and Jone and their two children became ‘unlawful non citizens’ for the purposes of the Migration Act – ‘illegal immigrants’ or simply ‘illegals’ in everyday parlance. At this point, the family ‘disappeared’, moving to Melbourne to cover their tracks.
Despite this Jone had little trouble finding work. Most of his work came through labour hire companies, in a range of low- and semi-skilled jobs, at a brickworks, an industrial bakery and yet another chicken factory. By now there was an Australian-based family of five to feed and clothe – Sally the baby was born in Melbourne about a year before the family was arrested – but Karoline often worked too, managing the children by taking different shifts from Jone. Still they sent money home. By scrimping and saving on their own needs they could each send about $250 a fortnight. From pay packets of around $450 a week Karoline and Jone paid rent, fed and clothed themselves and their children and sent $1,000 a month to relatives in Fiji.

Penia is yawning, and baby Sally has finally settled and fallen asleep across her father’s shoulder. Visiting time is over. I promise to come again before the family is sent back to Fiji – if possible. Once the paperwork is done, ‘removal’ could take place at any time, and Karoline and Jone hope this will be sooner rather than later. I retrace my path back out through security, retrieve my belongings and head for the privacy of the car. Under the light of a street lamp I sit and scribble notes of our illicit conversation.

Karoline, Jone and their children were among the 20,003 illegals apprehended by immigration staff in the 2003-04 financial year: a near-record haul, double the number found in the first year of the Howard Government. While the Tampa affair and the ‘Pacific solution’ became symbols of the Coalition’s approach to policing frontiers, at a more mundane and bureaucratic level, another kind of border control has been assiduously implemented – rounding up and removing those who are already inside Australia’s borders without permission.

Under the leadership of former minister Philip Ruddock, the department posted steady gains in the location and removal of ‘unlawful non-citizens’. There are two basic categories of unlawful non-citizens: ‘overstayers’ (foreign nationals like Karoline and Jone whose visas have expired) and visitors on current visas who breach the rules, generally by working without permission (as Karoline and Jone did when they first arrived). Under Ruddock, immigration bureaucrats took pride in a steadily rising graph of locations and removals. (See chart 1) The numbers levelled out after he moved on but this does not imply a lapse under the watch of subsequent ministers. The reduced catch was a result of trawling a depleted sea: at June 30, 2006 the estimate of overstayers in Australia had fallen to just 46,400, its lowest level in a decade and half the peak in 1989–90. This is all the more remarkable as the number of visitors has risen steadily. (See charts 2 and 3) Since the Howard Government took office in 1996, annual arrivals at Australian airports and ports have jumped from 6.8 million in 1995–96, to 10.7 million in 2005–06 from increased tourism, a boom in international students and rapid growth of temporary workers on ‘457 visas’. As visitor numbers rise, so do potential overstayers, but the absolute number of people living unlawfully in Australia is going down, not up.
Unlike most developed nations, Australia can justifiably claim to be controlling its borders and managing its migration program. Geography helps. Physical isolation makes clandestine entry difficult and the lack of contiguous land borders facilitates a universal visa system to strictly monitor arrivals and departures. The department’s database registers exactly who has entered the country and who has left. The system not only identifies the number of people who have failed to leave when their visas expire – authorities also have a good idea of who these unlawful non citizens are. They know their names, nationality, gender, age and how long they have been here. We learn from statistical breakdowns that about one third of these overstayers have been in Australia for a decade or more; that almost one in ten fall into what might be called the ‘grandmother’ category – women over sixty – that visitors from Greece, the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, Kiribati and Samoa are more likely to overstay their visas than any other nationality and that (as at June 30, 2006) the largest two groups of overstayers were from the USA and Britain, followed by China, the Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia. Only four other Pacific Island nations feature in the department’s list of seventy countries with more than fifty overstayers – Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, PNG and Nauru.

The Auditor-General has concluded that Australia’s immigration compliance arrangements are ‘arguably the most effective of any country in the world’, and by international measure Australia’s problem with illegals is insignificant. The ratio of unlawful non-citizens to total population is about one to 450. Compare this to the ratio of one to thirty in the United States, where there are an estimated ten million undocumented migrants, or one to 140 in Britain, where the number of unlawful residents is estimated at 440,000 (of whom about 40,000 are thought to be Australians).

Despite the federal government’s success in reducing the number of illegals, a preoccupation with border security remains undiminished. Channel 7’s series Border Security is a runaway hit, consistently winning its timeslot with more than a million viewers a week, and in the top twenty-five programs on television. Described as a ‘docu-drama’, Border Security takes a fly-on-the-wall approach, filming immigration and customs inspection benches at airports and on Coastwatch vessels as they intercept hapless Indonesian fishermen trespassing inside Australia’s exclusive economic zone, South American drug smugglers sweating as their bags are tested for cocaine, Middle Eastern migrants protesting as their fruit is confiscated, a Korean man stoically refusing to admit to his true identity and a young British woman sobbing as she is prevented from re-joining her Australian boyfriend. The series – subtitled Australia’s Frontline – is produced by Seven in cooperation with three government agencies – Immigration, Customs and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. It is based on a program that first aired in New Zealand. Four networks pitched the idea to the federal government, seeking permission to produce a similar series. After two years of negotiation (and approval by the Prime Minister’s Office),
Seven was chosen – it guaranteed prime-time, free-to-air scheduling and agreed to give the government considerable control over the final product. While the producers choose the stories and determine the editorial slant, each episode is only broadcast after written approval is obtained from all three government agencies, which have a right of veto over any footage in the final cut. As public affairs staff from the Customs Service enthuse, ‘no other comparable communications vehicle could have delivered a message to 1.2 million people and reached such a wide demographic.’

_Border Security_ has been dubbed ‘real’ reality TV, but its essential purpose is entertainment. Sometimes weeks of filming can produce nothing but routine airport processing without the human drama, conflict and emotion that make compelling television. Only the exceptional events make it to air. Nevertheless, the program accurately portrays the effective policing of Australia’s frontiers. It helps foster what the Audit Office approvingly calls ‘a community climate conducive to compliance’, and contributes to the success of initiatives like the ‘Immigration Dob-in Line’.

The Dob-in Line (its official name) was launched in February 2004; $70,000 was committed to promote it in newspapers. In the accompanying media release, ‘concerned members of the community’ were invited to identify a neighbour whose papers might not be in order or a work colleague who perhaps lacked permission to work in Australia. The ‘enthusiasm and support’ of citizens was mobilised to defend Australia’s ‘robust immigration system’. Then immigration minister Amanda Vanstone acknowledged that some information could be unreliable, but said staff would be able to distinguish good information from that given by ‘old snoops and gossips’ or those with axes to grind. A year after its inception, the line was receiving about two thousand calls a month; just under a quarter were then referred for further action. In 2005-06, although no longer so prominently promoted, it received almost 33,000 calls. The phone is answered in person – at least during office hours – and the ‘dober’ is not required to give their name or contact details, though they are asked for as much information on the ‘dober’ as possible, including passport number, date of arrival in Australia, type of visa and whether or not they own a dog (the last presumably for the personal safety of officers who might conduct the raid). Even before the Dob-in Line, community tip-offs were the source of a fifth of the department’s ‘priority locations’ of unlawful non-citizens or people working in breach of their visa conditions.

The rhetoric of border protection is not the preserve of the Howard government. The Dob-in Line was launched just after then opposition leader Mark Latham raised illegal immigration in his 2004 election pitch. Latham promised ‘zero tolerance’ of illegal migrants ‘taking up Australian jobs and running down Australian working conditions and entitlements’. In his view, illegal migrants were ‘the biggest problem in Australia’s migration system’. In early 2005, Sydney’s mass circulation tabloid _The Daily Telegraph_ picked up the theme, warning that thousands of illegal workers were ‘depriving Australians and genuine immigrants of jobs’.
The reality is far more complex: to use the phrase of British researchers Bill Jordan and Frank Düvell, undocumented migrants are ‘inconspicuously useful’ to the host society, as likely to create jobs as to ‘steal’ them. To take just one Australian example, horticultural producers complain that they employ illegals to pick fruit because locals don’t want the work. The alternative is crops left to rot on the trees, with jobs lost in transport, processing and retail, and export dollars foregone.

While public attention was focused on the fate of asylum-seekers, immigration officials were pursuing their compliance activities with vigour, assisted by powers to search, enter and detain that are far more sweeping and lightly regulated than those state or federal police have for criminal investigations – powers only trumped by those more recently given federal police and intelligence services to combat terrorism. Under the Migration Act, officers can raid premises with authorisation from the secretary of the department or his delegate; there is no need to trouble a court or magistrate for a warrant. The Commonwealth Ombudsman, Privacy Commissioner, Senate Committees and even the Attorney–General’s department have expressed concerns about these powers and called for them to be placed under judicial oversight, but such reforms have been rejected by the government on the basis of expediency: ‘The delay that is often involved in contacting and consulting with a judicial officer in order to obtain a search warrant is unacceptable in situations where … officers require a warrant as a matter of urgency to assist in apprehending an illegal migrant believed to be at a particular residence.’

The number of unlawful non-citizens located ‘in the field’ – that is, in raids on workplaces and homes – doubled to 9,062 in the decade to 2004–05. With an eye to public opinion a friendly media team is sometimes invited to document the action. When immigration officials busted three upmarket Doyle’s seafood restaurants in Sydney, journalists from The Daily Telegraph were in tow. Under the headline ‘Catch of the day’ the paper reported that patrons ‘sitting down to lunchtime seafood platters, lobster and oysters were stunned as a total of fifty field officers’ raided the restaurants and ‘netted’ eleven unlawful workers, mostly from Indonesia.

The department’s 250 or so ‘compliance’ officers do not do all the grunt work of tracking down undocumented migrants. State and federal police also carry out compliance functions or are involved in raids. (According to information given in Senate estimates, it is ‘not unusual’ for fifty or so officers to be involved in a raid like the one on Doyle’s restaurants.) Other public officials can also be empowered under the Act and there are stories of public servants in fruit-growing districts calling in sick on days when compliance activities are underway, in order to avoid being conscripted into a raid on a local orchard.

The department engages licensing and registration bodies to ‘proactively’ check the immigration status of employees – from the Victorian Taxi Directorate to the West
Australian Hairdresser’s Registration Board – and uses data matching with other federal and state authorities. (Its data-sharing arrangement with the ATO is known as UNCLE – the Unlawful Non-Citizen Location Enquiry).

There are also more hands-on techniques. In 2004, the Pacific Islands News Association reported that immigration officials were engaged in ‘trawling’: targeting workplaces where large numbers of Tongans and Fijians were known to work on the assumption that at least some would be working without authorisation. Around this time an undocumented Filipino migrant living near Swan Hill told me that during the fruit-picking season police in the main street had been randomly stopping shoppers ‘who did not look Australian’ to ask for identification. None of this is new. Tongan fruit-pickers in the Victorian town of Robinvale were making similar allegations more than twenty years ago. In 1993 compliance officers in the department’s Parramatta office used a phone book CD-ROM to identify suspect individuals ‘selected in part because their names were uncommon in the Australian community’. Of the four hundred overstayers targeted, forty were located. Around the same time, officers in Victoria were using the electoral roll ‘to provide an indication of whether an individual was an Australian citizen’.

Given these methods, it comes as no surprise that the department is more efficient at tracking down unlawful non-citizens from some countries than from others. The National Audit Office found that the overall ‘rate of location’ of overstayers in 1992–93 was nearly 20 per cent (of an estimated total of 79,755 overstayers, 14,874 were located). However the ‘rate of location’ for Brazilians, Tongans, Fijians, Samoans and Thais was closer to 30 per cent, whereas French, American and Dutch overstayers were rarely found. As the Auditor-General concluded, rather than using ‘proactive methods’ to track down citizens from countries like the UK and Canada, the department appeared to hope they would turn themselves in.16

Applying the same methodology to more recent data, the same bias was still evident more than a decade later. In 2003–04 Britons made up the largest single group of overstayers, more than 10 per cent of the total. Yet the ‘rate of location’ for British nationals was 18.5 per cent compared with 64.4 per cent of Fijians like Karoline and Jone and others of distinctive appearance (82.4 per cent for Indians, 69.9 per cent for Chinese, 64.2 per cent for Indonesians, 53.0 per cent for Thais and 42.8 per cent for South Koreans).17

Karoline and Jone don’t know how the department managed to catch up with them, but they suspect that they were dobbed in by a relative with whom they had argued. ‘It’s dangerous to have a falling out with someone who has permanent residency in Australia,’ says Karoline.

It was a winter morning, shortly before 7am, and Karoline was making sandwiches for Penaia’s lunch when she heard voices outside. There was a knock on
the back door, and when she answered a silver-badged official directed her to open
the front door. When she did, she was confronted by eight more compliance officers,
who immediately entered her home and began searching for other occupants. With
no chance to wash, dress or prepare food, Karoline and the children were bundled
into a van and escorted to a department office for processing. From there (and without
food or money) the family were taken to the Maribyrnong Immigration Detention
Centre. Later that morning Jone returned home from night shift to an empty house
with an immigration calling card pinned to the back door. Realising what had
happened, he faced a distressing choice. Deciding that he could not go on without his
children, Jone surrendered.

Despite accepting that they must return to Fiji, and with three young children to
care for, Karoline and Jone were not allowed to post a bond and be released into the
community to organise their own departure. The department considered them too
great a flight risk. Instead they were detained at Maribyrnong.

On my second visit to the family, three weeks later, the waiting room had changed –
the original bent metal furniture had been replaced with stackable light-plastic
chairs. The makeover was not for aesthetic reasons. Karoline explained there had been
a disturbance one evening when detention centre staff refused to allow a detainee
immediate access to medication brought in by a friend. When he was told that he
would have to wait until the next day for a nurse to approve and administer it, he
flew into a rage, grabbing a chair and smashing every pane in the glass-enclosed
visiting area. Visits to the detention centre were suspended for a week while the area
was repaired and the metal furniture replaced.

Not surprisingly, this had made Karoline more anxious and determined to get her
family out of detention. Penaia was able to attend a local Catholic primary school
during the day but Felise had only baby Sally as a playmate. (There were no other
children in Maribyrnong at the time.) During the two-week school holiday, Penaia
was stuck in the centre all day too and it was hard to keep the kids amused. They
were taken on an outing to the circus but a planned trip to the zoo was called off due
to bad weather. Penaia’s closest school friend, Bailey, had also come to visit, bringing
with him a Lego toy. Bailey was deeply distressed when Penaia disappeared
suddenly from class, and visiting him in the detention centre reassured him that
Penaia was okay.

During my second visit, Karoline and Jone talked more about their lives in
Australia. It is an understandable assumption that unauthorised migrants are
vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. Given their status, they are not
in a position to complain about abuse in the workplace. Surprisingly, Karoline and
Jone experienced few such problems – perhaps because their employers did not know
that they were illegal. Ironically, when they ran into difficulties it was because
employers were trying to confer them with additional rights. At one stage Karoline and
Jone both worked at a chicken processing factory in an outer Melbourne suburb. They had been taken on as casuals and described it as a ‘good job’ – only a basic wage but with reliable hours and tolerable conditions. After three months, in accord with award requirements, the factory offered to convert them into ongoing members of staff. Karoline and Jone politely thanked the manager, took home the forms that they had been asked to fill-in and never returned: to move from casual to permanent they would have to provide proof of citizenship or permanent residence. This was impossible. It was safer to get another job.

Other problems arose whenever they needed medical attention, as they did not have Medicare cards. If a doctor began asking too many questions, Karoline would switch to a new GP and start again. She would invent stories for doctors and hospital staff that the family was visiting Australia on holidays. By contrast, school was not a problem. Penaia started primary school in 2004, just like any other five-year-old. Karoline and Jone remained on guard; only their very closest friends knew their status.

Given these difficulties, why not return home? I asked. By the time they were detained, Karoline and Jone had paid their original debts and Timi and Anna were growing up in Fiji without parents or siblings. Despite the separation, thoughts of returning to Fiji had receded. It was not what the extended family wanted. Karoline and Jone were enmeshed in a complex web of opportunity and obligation. They were able to earn wages far in excess of anything on offer in Fiji and the money they sent home had become a key source of income – not only for the grandparents and the two children in their care, but for a network of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews.

This is a global story. Karoline and Jone were like the two hundred million other migrants around the world who regularly send money home. The World Bank estimates global remittances sent through official channels were worth US$167 billion in 2005 but since a lot of money moves informally, ‘the true size of remittance flows may be much higher – perhaps 50 per cent or more’.

The value of official remittances was more than double the sum of all aid money given in 2005 – more than triple the global aid budget if informal remittances are included. The sweat of millions of migrant workers like Karoline and Jone becomes a torrent of funds that flows from the developed to the developing world. And while these rivers of cash are privatised – mostly moving between relatives – there is growing evidence they contribute significantly to poverty alleviation and promoting economic development. As the World Bank notes, remittances ‘can help smooth household consumption, especially in response to adverse events, such as crop failure or a health crisis’ and can increase ‘household investments in education, entrepreneurship, and health – all of which have a high social return in most circumstances’.

For many developing countries, remittances are the single most important source of foreign income. This is particularly true of Pacific Island nations. Remittances are
equal to 42 per cent of Tonga’s total gross domestic product and 60 per cent of all households have a least one family member working overseas.\textsuperscript{20} Tonga has a small economy and a long history of outward migration but remittances are also of increasing importance in the much larger economy of Fiji, where the migration story is more recent. Up to a third of all households in Fiji now have someone overseas and the money that Karoline and Jone sent home each month contributed to an estimated US$130 million remitted in 2004.\textsuperscript{21} Remittances have more than doubled since 2001, explained in part by the recruitment of more than a thousand Fijians to work as security guards, truck drivers and labourers in Middle East war zones,\textsuperscript{22} in addition to the Fijian soldiers in peacekeeping missions around the world and the 2,000 Fijian soldiers recruited directly into the British Army.\textsuperscript{23} According to some calculations, remittances now outstrip the combined income from Fiji’s two biggest industries – tourism and sugar.\textsuperscript{24}

Just as important as the amount is the way the money is spent. Karoline and Jone’s story of financing siblings, nieces and nephews through school is common. A detailed household survey in Fiji by the World Bank found that ‘remittances are associated with better educational achievement’ for teenagers. The remittances of seafarers who crew vessels for international shipping companies are a crucial source of revenue for Kiribati and 13 per cent spent of the money sent home is spent on school fees, while another third is saved for investment. Workers do not have to be permanent or long-term migrants to benefit from remittance flows. Under Canada’s seasonal labour program, migrants from Mexico and the Caribbean spend several months each year working in the horticultural industry in Ontario. Detailed research on the program found Jamaican workers spend more than a third of remittances on children’s education\textsuperscript{25} and there is a positive correlation between the number of years workers are employed in the Canadian program and their children’s school leaving age.\textsuperscript{26}

While Karoline and Jone were supporting their extended family in Fiji, Penaia, Felice and Sally were growing up as young Australians, watching Australian television, playing with Australian friends, eating vegemite and cornflakes. This made a return to Fiji even harder to contemplate. And just as the prospect of legal work had enticed Karoline and Jone to apply for a refugee visa when they first arrived, they began to realise that their Australian-born children offered a potential path to legality. If the family could remain undetected until Penaia turned ten, he would qualify to become an Australian citizen and could sponsor the family to stay permanently. Instead, immigration caught up with them not long after Penaia turned six.

In the end, the family spent eight weeks in the detention centre, before the documents were issued to facilitate their removal from Australia. As the time passed, Karoline and Jone clocked up a massive debt. The government charges unlawful non-citizens for the cost of their detention and the debt must be discharged before they can return to Australia. Karoline and her family were charged around $125 each for every
day (no discount for children). After eight weeks their bill was more than $35,000. Officials had informed Karoline and Jone of these charges when they were first detained, but Karoline’s response was dismissive, ‘We’ve already paid for it.’ The officials looked confused so she spelt it out in plainer terms. ‘I think nine and a half years of paying taxes in this country ought to about cover it,’ she said. Throughout their unlawful stay in Australia, Karoline and Jone had been law-abiding, tax-paying residents.

A bout a year and a half after the family was removed from Australia, I flew to Fiji to take part in a World Bank seminar on seasonal work visas for Pacific Islanders. I tracked down a relative of Karoline and Jone who lived in Sigatoka and who had a telephone. I told her when I was arriving and asked if she could pass on a message that I wanted to come and visit. I received word back to be at the Sigatoka bus station on Tuesday morning – Jone would catch the early morning bus down from the highlands and meet me there.

I flew into Nadi late on Monday night, and hired a small four-wheeldrive vehicle at the airport. I set out early the next morning and arrived at Sigatoka with plenty of time to spare. The bus station was next to a bustling market and I walked around inspecting the produce. I bought fresh-peeled pineapple on a stick for breakfast. Whenever a creaking, fume-belching bus arrived I’d look carefully for Jone amongst the alighting passengers. I figured that if he was already at the bus station then he would have approached me by now – I was the only non-Fijian there – but I had forgotten Jone’s shyness. After an hour or so, and a couple of telephone calls to the Sigatoka relative who assured me that Jone was waiting for me, we found each other.

After stocking up on food for the family, Jone and I drove through the Sigatoka valley and up into the highlands. The bitumen soon gives way to dirt, deeply rutted and potholed by lumbering buses and tropical downpours. When I point to the fields of cassava, tobacco and papaya growing by the roadside Jone tells me that the valley is one of the most fertile regions in Fiji and provides food for all the big hotels in Suva and Nadi, ‘but the government can’t even fix the road to help farmers get their produce to market’. He points to the spot where a cousin died instantly, when his one-tonne truck ran off the road and collided with a tree. ‘It’s not like in Oz,’ he says. ‘There if you work harder, you earn more money. Here you work hard and you don’t get anything.’ At one point the dirt briefly reverts to bitumen and we pass a police car parked on the verge. Jone explains that hidden from view are illicit crops of marijuana and the cops wait to inspect vehicles heading into town.

The road winds alongside the Sigatoka River, brown and swollen from recent heavy rains. ‘I hope you can swim,’ says Jone, ‘because we’re living on the other side of the river.’ I assume he’s joking and that we’ll eventually come to a bridge, but after two hours of bumping and lurching we pull off the road onto a dirt track and park by the river. Jone greets the family living in a tin hut and retrieves an old
fertiliser sack from their veranda. He suggests that I swap my long trousers for shorts and my shoes for sandals. After I’ve changed we load up his sack with my dry clothes, camera, wallet, passport, the food supplies we bought in the Sigatoka market and some gifts for the children that I’ve brought from Australia. Jone hoists the bulging sack onto his shoulder and we wade into the river. It’s at least a hundred metres across and at first the going is easy. The water flows fast but shallow and it’s relatively easy to keep my footing. But as we get further from the bank I realise the depth is not uniform. There are channels where the water runs deep and strong. When the water reaches my waist I am alarmed: I can feel the current dragging at my legs and stones cutting into my feet. Once or twice I almost fall. Jone notices and insists that I hold his hand. I swallow my embarrassment and grip tight – and it’s just as well. Jone helps me stay upright as I slip and stumble. Balancing me on one arm and the heavy sack on the other, he moves us steadily to the safety of the opposite bank. We then walk along a dirt path for another twenty minutes, eventually turning away from the river to cut through some fields and onto the grounds of a forlorn and mildewed boarding school. Then we climb a steep hill to a simple besser block house looking out over the valley.

The house is a temporary home for the family, part of Karoline’s two-month contract as a fill-in teacher at the school, where Penaia, Timi and Anna are pupils. (The family’s permanent home is on the other side of the river, further into the highlands.) The view from the veranda is magnificent but that is the only good thing about it. The painted walls are faded and dirty; there are no doors in the frames, no fridge and only a kerosene lamp for light at night. The generator that once supplied electricity broke down some time ago and has not been repaired. They cook on a wood stove in the corner.

I am reacquainted with Penaia, Felice and Sally – and introduced to the newest member of the family, a seven-month-old baby girl swinging in a hammock fashioned from a length of rope, a folded blanket and two stout sticks. Karoline tells me the story of the baby’s dramatic arrival. Parents take it in turns to live in at the school for a week at a time as volunteer cooks for teachers and pupils. When Karoline and Jone’s names came up, the river was running high and the crossing was extremely difficult. Jone borrowed a horse to ford the river, and Karoline, too pregnant to sit astride the animal, walked along behind, grabbing hold of its tail. The water reached her neck and they made it safely to the opposite bank only with great effort. Karoline’s waters broke, but there was no way she could cross the river again to get to the nearest medical clinic. Karoline waited until the next day for the river to drop and then Jone and three other men ferried her across in a kayak, lashed together with inflated inner tubes for extra stability. Safely on the other side, Karoline was rushed to the local health centre where she gave birth an hour and a half later. The baby then spent two months in an incubator in Sigatoka hospital.

In a matter of fact way, Karoline tells me that she and Jone will not be keeping the
child. The baby will be raised by Jone’s brother and his wife, who are childless. Karoline tells me that the informal adoption will take place in a couple months, when she is fully weaned. I am as shocked by this as I was in Melbourne, when Karoline and Jone told me they had left two infants in Fiji. As a father, I found this difficult to comprehend. In a Fijian context, familial responsibilities are more dispersed; the delegation of care to grandparents and other family members is more widely accepted. Karoline and Jone did not find it easy to relinquish their baby and their long separation from Timi and Anna caused them great pain and anguish. Their decisions point to the constraints on personal choice that operate in the context of poverty and border controls.

Unfortunately I don’t meet Timi and Anna, now teenagers and away on a school trip. After nine and a half years in Australia, Karoline said it was very hard to reconnect with them. The children ‘came and said hello but then kept their distance’, clinging to the grandparents who had raised them. But Karoline says the relationship has improved since she began to teach at their school. Timi and Anna moved out of the dormitory and to stay in the besser brick house on the hill where they had the longest period of living together as a family. ‘These two months have really helped us a lot,’ she says. But this is about to end. In a couple of weeks Karoline’s temporary job as a replacement teacher will finish. The family will vacate the house and Timi and Anna will move back to the school dormitory.

The transition to life in Fiji has been most difficult for the eldest Australian-born child, Penaia. Initially he found school boring. He had to learn to read and write in Fijian, and learn the distinct local dialect to get along in the playground and classroom. Despite these challenges, he has done well, topping his year at school, but Penaia has lost weight, he does not much care for the traditional Fijian diet and misses the weetbix and peanut butter he enjoyed in Australia. Penaia has also had to come to terms with his new rank in the family: no longer the oldest, he defers to two senior siblings.

While we talk, Penaia snoops round the kitchen. There’s a pot of cold corn cobs on the stove, cooked the night before. He asks if he can have one, but he’s told he must wait, otherwise there’ll be nothing for lunch. The children all have angry sores on their legs and arms – scabies, Karoline tells me. She thinks it’s because they grew up in Australia, and their immune systems are ill-equipped to cope with Fiji’s virulent tropical bugs and parasites. ‘Even Jone and I have had scabies since coming back,’ she says, ‘and we never had them before we went to Australia.’

In truth, if the family is prone to illness, it’s probably due to poor nutrition and the difficulty of keeping children and clothes clean in a crowded house without hot water. Karoline says the family needs two bars of soap a week but each bar costs F$2.40 in the nearest store. ‘You can buy the same bar of soap for $1.89 down the hill in Sigatoka,’ she says ‘but the bus fare there and back again is $8.’ Her temporary teaching pays F$200 a
fortnight, which ‘doesn’t even cover the cost of groceries’. School fees for Timi, Anna and Penaia amount to $30 per term before uniforms, textbooks, note books, pens and pencils – costs that will rise when Felise starts school too.

The family grows much of its own food – sweet corn, pumpkin, taro, yam, cassava and papaya – and Jone bakes their bread in the wood-fired oven. On their block of land further up the valley, Jone runs a few cattle and seven goats. Goat meat is popular with Fiji’s Indian community and around festive seasons a kid can fetch F$60. Jone also sells their surplus corn and Karoline says they get 30 cents a kilogram at the market. This sounds like a reasonable return until she explains that the price is for dried corn, husked and off the cob. At least the waste husks and cobs can be burned as firewood. Karoline tells me that they’ve also tried to grow watermelon, a more lucrative crop but it is ‘a bit of a gamble’. Heavy rain at the wrong time means the flowers drop before the fruit sets. ‘Three times we’ve planted watermelons,’ she sighs, ‘and three times the crop has failed.’

I had fully expected to find Karoline and her family living in difficult circumstances but in their home I am confronted and embarrassed by the extent of their poverty. It is more difficult than our previous meetings in Maribyrnong. There, the reasons for the family’s predicament were easily identified – rigorous rules backed by the penalty of mandatory detention. In Maribyrnong there was also something to look forward to – release, once new passports were finally issued. Back in Fiji, the causes of the family’s difficulties are more complex; there is no obvious end in sight.

A couple of hours have passed and threatening grey clouds have pushed aside the morning’s bright sunshine. ‘You’d better go soon,’ Jone tells me. ‘Once the rain starts the river will rise quickly and you might not get across.’ Karoline insists on giving me lunch before we leave – thick doorstep sandwiches sliced from Jone’s home-made bread and followed with pieces of home-grown papaya, the best I’ve ever tasted. While I eat, Karoline cradles the baby and Jone gently fans her to sleep in his wife’s arms.

I leave the besser block house above the boarding school carrying a letter from Penaia to his old school friend Bailey in Melbourne and a letter from Karoline to Bailey’s mother, asking whether she has an old school bag that Bailey is no longer using – maybe she could post it to Penaia? I promise to send Karoline supplies of a common brand of deodorant – the same brand is sold in Fiji but she says it’s just doesn’t work as well – and I make a mental note to send a good supply of lotion to treat scabies.

Steady rain is falling by the time we get to the river, but Jone helps me across without incident. As I drive back to Sigatoka, the dirt road becomes a stream, rushing down the hill. Karoline and Jone’s words go around in my head: during my visit each of them had said separately, despair in their voices, ‘We’re right back where we started.’
Chart 1: location and removal of unlawful non-citizens under Howard
Charts 2 and 3: Comparison of trends in overstayer numbers and airport arrivals

- **Overstayer estimates (thousands)**

  - 95/96: 30
  - 96/97: 40
  - 97/98: 50
  - 98/99: 60
  - 99/00: 70
  - 00/01: 80
  - 01/02: 90
  - 02/03: 100
  - 03/04: 110
  - 04/05: 120
  - 05/06: 130

- **Annual arrivals (millions)**

  - 95/96: 0
  - 96/97: 1
  - 97/98: 2
  - 98/99: 3
  - 99/00: 4
  - 00/01: 5
  - 01/02: 6
  - 02/03: 7
  - 03/04: 8
  - 04/05: 9
  - 05/06: 10
Names have been changed to protect the privacy of Karoline and her family.


Joint Standing Committee on Migration Regulations. 'Illegal entrants in Australia: balancing control and compassion'. September 1990, AGPS, Canberra The number of overstayers apprehended by immigration officials in 2005-6 also fell as a result of the fall-out from the illegal detention of Australian resident Cornelia Rau and the illegal deportation of Australian citizen Vivian Solon. The cultural overhaul of the department that followed the Palmer and Comrie reports into those events involved wholesale retraining of compliance staff before they could 'undertake field activities' contributing to a 'reduction in compliance location numbers' (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Annual Report 2005-06 Canberra October 2006 p.158 http://www.immi.gov.au/about/reports/annual/2005-06_/pdf/DIMA-annual-report-2005-06-complete.pdf)


ibid.

This is the mid-point in 2006 Home Office estimates of between 310,000 and 570,000 illegal immigrants in the UK. See Nigel Morris 'Amnesty on illegal immigrants is 'worth £6bn to UK' The Independent 31 March 2006 http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/this_britain/article354784.ece


Simon Latimer and Matt Waddell, Australian Customs Service presentation to the conference Public affairs in the public sector Sydney 17 March 2005


Bill Jordan and Frank Düvell Irregular Migration: The Dilemmas of Transnational Mobility Edward Elgar Cheltenham, UK 2002


Australian National Audit Office, Audit Report No. 35 1993-94 'The Compliance Function: Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs' AGPS, Canberra, pp24-26


19 Ibid. p.xiii


21 Ibid. p


23 ‘Fiji’s ‘unsung heroes’ of UK army’, BBC News Online, Tuesday, 9 November 2004

24 Dr Eci Nabalarua, Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of the South Pacific quoted in ‘Fiji remittances top tourism, sugar revenues’ Fiji Sun 27 June 2007.
