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Japanese academic claims legal action against university led to Villawood detention

PM - Tuesday, 27 June , 2006 18:29:00

Reporter: Brendan Trembath

MARK COLVIN: A highly qualified Japanese woman has been locked up in immigration detention over events surrounding her attempt to get a PhD at university here.

For more than a month now, Megumi Ogawa has been in custody in a Sydney detention centre.

She says the Department of Immigration told her that her temporary visa had expired.

But Ms Ogawa, who's written a highly praised book on broadcasting rights, suspects there's a lot more to it.

She claims she was only locked up after she took legal action against the University of Melbourne over the conduct of a supervisor.

Brendan Trembath reports.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: A detention centre in western Sydney is an unlikely place to find a well-spoken Japanese woman with degrees from two prestigious universities.

Megumi Ogawa can't believe she's in custody at the Villawood Immigrant Detention Centre.

MEGUMI OGAWA: It's very difficult to keep sanity here. Everybody's very stressed and distressed.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: On the 19th of May she says the Federal Police came to her home at the request of the Department of Immigration.

MEGUMI OGAWA: I didn't understand what happened, but anyway it's police so there's nothing I can do. So I had to, well opened a suitcase and I chucked into the... clothes, as much as possible.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: Megumi Ogawa says she has a law degree from Waseda University and a Masters from the Yokohama National University.

She's been completing her PhD studies in Australia and claims her present situation may have something to do with a dispute she had with an academic supervisor at the University of Melbourne.

MEGUMI OGAWA: Three days before DIMIA (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs) come to collect me, the Federal Court ordered a trial date of my legal action against the University of Melbourne.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: The University of Melbourne has confirmed in a statement that Megumi Ogawa has begun legal action against the university in the Federal Court.

EXCERPT FROM STATEMENT: The University of Melbourne confirms there are federal court proceedings initiated by Ms Ogawa against the university, relating to her enrolment here as a student, and which the university has been defending in the absence of what it believes is a meritorious case by Ms Ogawa.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: Megumi Ogawa says she's lonely in custody at Villawood but she can count on many supporters outside, including academics and fellow students.

Veronica Meneses, from the International Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia, is calling on the Department of Immigration to release Ms Ogawa immediately.

VERONICA MENESES: She has a case against the Melbourne University to, to put it together and she really need to work it out on this.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: Ms Meneses says Megumi Ogawa's academic research on international broadcasting rights is respected and the former Australian chief justice, Sir Anthony Mason, once wrote a glowing reference.

VERONICA MENESES: Certainly she has been contributing quite large in, you know, you can find articles from Megumi Ogawa in some of the different journals, law journals in Australia and abroad.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: There are apparently no other Japanese in the detention centre.

Megumi Ogawa says most of those around her are from China.

She says the Japanese Consulate did not seem that concerned that she's the detention centre's only Japanese detainee.

MEGUMI OGAWA: When I contacted, they said that it's just an overstay, isn't it? The Australian Government will not kill you.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: No that's hardly likely.

Megumi Ogawa says she's fed several times a day but the food is not very nutritious.

MEGUMI OGAWA: Not at all, and the vegetables are very sparse.

BRENDAN TREMBATH: *PM* has contacted the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, which has issued a short statement.

It says: "this person is not the holder of a valid visa and is therefore unlawfully in Australia. As a result, she has been detained in accordance with the Migration Act. She has an application before the Federal Magistrate's Court challenging a number of aspects of her current immigration status. A case manager has been appointed and the department is actively reviewing her case".

MARK COLVIN: Brendan Trembath.

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