

Arab women tell of harassment

By TANIA KUTNY

ARAB women in Brunswick say that since the war in the Gulf broke out, they have been abused and harassed.

Brunswick Council community development worker, Mrs Amenta Rafhi, said she was aware of several incidents and had been the subject of abuse herself.

She was verbally abused by three women while walking to her car in Blyth St.

She said the women, aged in their late 20s, had called her a "bloody wog" told her "to go back to your own country" and swore at her.

She said she pretended not to understand English and believed this helped her escape further abuse.

Mrs Rafhi, who is of Lebanese descent, said she was still shaken by the abuse and feared walking in Sydney Rd.

She said many Australians did not understand the issues in

the Gulf war and simply attacked any woman wearing a head scarf.

Italian, Albanian, Turkish and Lebanese women also wore head scarfs and were subject to similar abuse.

Mrs Rafhi, an organiser of a Brunswick Arabic women's group, said incidents of harassment began before the war and were continuing.

"One woman told me she was spat at by a man in Sydney Rd and when her husband intervened a fight broke out," Mrs Rafhi said.

"Another woman had her scarf ripped off her head by two men after she got off a tram in Sydney Rd.

"Women are locking themselves in their homes. They are too frightened to go out.

"We are all under a lot of

pressure and it's sad," Mrs Rafhi said.

"I left Lebanon to escape war as did many others. It is harder to face the verbal abuse than it is the bombs. What ever happened to freedom and multiculturalism?"

"We don't want war yet we are being attacked because we wear head scarfs. Not all Moslems and Arabs support Iraq.

"Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are 100 per cent Moslem, Egypt is 95 per cent and Syria is 90 per cent Moslem, but they don't support Iraq.

"This is not a religious war. It is not Christians and Jews against Moslem, it's about oil, nothing more."

The co-ordinator of the Committee against Arab discrimination, Joe Waskim, said the group was receiving reports every day of abuse against Arabs, particularly women, in the northern suburbs.

He said all the attacks were targeted at residents who looked like they were of Arabic descent.

"The attacks are based on ignorance. There is a poor assumption between anyone who looks Arabic and the Iraqi conflict.

"Brunswick has a big Arabic and Islamic population and it is these people who have been intimidated into silence. It's morally wrong and very stupid," he said.

Mr Waskim urged residents to report incidents to the police or the Equal Opportunity Board.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity Commissioner, Ms Moira Rayner, said abuse, threats or discrimination against Arabs or Moslems were cowardly, vicious and illegal under the Equal Opportunity Act.

She said people who had been abused should call the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity on 602 3222.



STEPHEN Blair.



ROBERT Burrowes.

No news of two in peace camp

THE fate of a Brunswick man and a Carlton North man taking part in a peace camp in Iraq remains unknown.

No news has been received of Stephen Blair, from Brunswick, or Robert Burrowes since soon after fighting broke out.

They are members of the Gulf Peace Group and are among the last Australians left in Iraq.

Group members in Melbourne disputed media reports that camp members had fled Ar'ar in a bus after the conflict began.

Brunswick resident and group member, Ms Wendy Orams, said the last information she had received was that the group was staying put and that its numbers had grown from about 30 to 90.

Group members are protesting the use of military force to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait: it believes sanctions alone should have been used.

Mr Blair and Mr Burrowes told friends before leaving Australia that they planned to stay after the war began to help in relief and humanitarian work.

Mr Blair is the International Amateur Radio Network's representative in the Gulf but is unable to transmit information because of the lack of equipment.

The network has sent a letter to Jordan's King Hussein asking him to negotiate with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein for the safe passage of radio workers.

It also wants to meet prisoners of war to assess their health and welfare.

MPs divided over Aussie Gulf role

MEMBERS of Parliament whose electorates include Brunswick have differing views on the Gulf crisis.

All are members of the ALP and their views were sought last week by the Sentinel.

The Member for Melbourne, Mr Neil Cole, and the Member for Richmond, Mr Dimitri Dollis, have called for a peaceful solution.

Mr Cole said that while he expects a victory for the United Nations forces against Iraq, "in

the long run the victory will not solve the problems of the Middle East".

"I do not see a solution to the problems in the Middle East coming about in my lifetime."

Mr Cole said he believed the current conflict would intensify the problems in the area.

He said that while he did not support the actions of Saddam Hussein, he believed that sanctions against Iraq had not been given sufficient time to take effect.

Mr Dollis, a founding

member of Parliamentarians for Peace, said he was "distressed that efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the Gulf crisis were not given more time".

He said: "Modern history has shown time and time again that it is the innocent and unarmed that suffer the greatest casualties from war."

"Even as the war is in its early stages, we must give every support to diplomatic and other initiatives for a cease-fire and a peaceful resolution.

"For there is no guarantee that the neutralising of Iraq's military force will, of itself, bring the desired peace and stability in the Middle East."

Mr Dollis called on Australia to play an "independent and mediating role in the Gulf conflict, 'especially in seeking negotiations for an international peace conference over the Middle East'".

A spokesman for the Member for Melbourne and Minister for Education and Training, (Legislative Council) Mr Barry Pullen, said Mr Pullen was "very concerned" about the crisis, but he had "not had the chance to fully study all the issues and could therefore not make a comment".

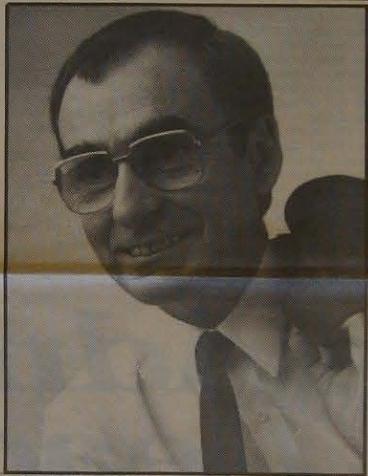
Member for Melbourne (Legislative Council), Mr Evan Walker, was asked his opinions but did not reply at press time.

The Member for Brunswick, and Treasurer, Mr Tom Roper, is overseas.

In the Federal arena, the views of Member for Wills, Prime Minister Mr Hawke, and the Member for Melbourne (Federal), Mr Gerry Hand, have been well canvassed in the media.

Both support Australia's involvement in the Gulf crisis.

They spoke in favor of the Federal Government's motion defending military action, passed in the Parliament last week.



MEMBER for Melbourne, Mr Gerry Hand: supported military action.



WHILE the world seems to be engrossed with the Gulf war, this message on a Nicholson St billboard offers a solution.