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By RICHARD KUIPERS

A Down Under "Fahrenheit 9/11," "Anthem" places contemporary Australian political and human rights issues under the microscope and doesn't like what it sees. Documakers Tahir Cambis and Helen Newman focus on the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers and argue the conservative government's immigration policies are directly related to its alignment with the U.S. in the war on terror. Still seeking a local distrib or broadcaster, "Anthem" should win slots in fests, perhaps prompting a local theatrical run in lead-up to Oz elections, expected before year's end.

Narrated in personal diary form by co-directors Cambis and Newman, pic unabashedly flies the flag of liberal humanism. But while it makes some disturbing observations, pic is too chaotically structured. Narration readily declares its single-minded approach to the subject matter, but overall impact would have benefited from responses by official solons. Still, "Anthem" is a timely docu that will generate discussion on vital topics and is sure to generate strong pro and con responses from audiences.

Filmed over three years, docu started as an inquiry on national identity and Australia's relationship with mother country England in the wake of the 2000 Sydney Olympic games and a 1999 referendum in which voters rejected the idea of an Australian republic. Events of 9/11 and subsequent commitment of Australian forces to Iraq shifted docu's focus to Australia-U.S. relations and the perceived impact of those ties on domestic immigration policy.

Cambis and Newman argue that mandatory detention of refugees and stringent, frequently protracted processing of new arrivals has provoked latent racism; and toughening up of border protection policies has permitted human rights violations to flourish under the cloak of national security. Most sensational charge leveled at Australian government is one of crimes against humanity, as determined by its own constitution.

Docu is most vital when taking up the cause of refugees awaiting the outcome of visa applications. Secretly filmed testimonies of families suffering effects of long-term separation and the suicide of an Iraqi detainee are edited with inflammatory intent alongside government reps expressing the official line of protecting the community from potential terrorist infiltration.

Fires of controversy are further stoked with eyewitness accounts of the deaths of 353 refugees on the boat Siev X while en route from Indonesia to Australia in October 2001, and the failure of an official inquiry to explain the tragedy.

Catalog of domestic incidents and issues is guaranteed to raise eyebrows and temperatures on both sides of the political divide, but the film is made less effective by a surfeit of distractions. Docu travels to Kosovar refugee camps, post-war Afghanistan and the streets of Baghdad.

Although human interest stories in earthquake-ravaged Afghanistan carry undeniable emotional clout, a cohesive essay fails to emerge. Scattershot references to anti-globaliza-

tion rallies, media manipulation and sundry other causes also clutter the picture. The unwieldy edit is clearly the legacy of too much information from too many spheres being crammed into the running time.

Mini-DV lensing is rough-and-ready, yet camera never fails to capture essentials and audio is crystal clear. Video reviewed was minus final color grading, sound mix and a few inserts of narration.

SYDNEY

ANTHEM

(DOCU - AUSTRALIA)

A Media World production, in association with Australian Film Commission, Film Victoria. (International sales: Media World, Melbourne.) Produced by Ross Hutchens.

Directed, written by Tahir Cambis, Helen Newman. Camera (color, mini DV), Cambis, Newman; editor, Bill Murphy; music director, Kavisha Mazella. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival, June 19, 2004. Running time: 97 MIN.

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