Asylum-seekers imprisoned in heat and squalor

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Hundreds of asylum seekers are being held in sweltering, over-crowded conditions in northern Australia—some housed in tents—while the federal government prepares to imprison hundreds more in remote desert country.

Over the past two weeks nearly 800 refugees have arrived by boat, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan. They have reportedly sailed from Indonesia, paying “people-smugglers” for perilous voyages to Western Australia's northern coast and Christmas Island, 1,500 kilometres off Australia's northwest shore. Others have been abandoned on Ashmore Reef, a rocky outpost in the Indian Ocean.

Because the government's main detention centre, at Port Hedland is full to capacity with 700 inmates, 1,000 refugees are being held in temporary centres on Christmas Island and in a hastily erected tent city at the Curtin Airbase near Derby in Western Australia's far north. The government is constructing another 1,200-person detention facility at Woomera, the base for a former desert rocket-firing and nuclear-testing range.

Of the 717 refugees who arrived on board six vessels intercepted by Australian immigration authorities in a fortnight, 513 are said to be Iraqis, 147 Afghanis and 57 of varying nationalities.

Many are being held in appalling conditions. On Christmas Island authorities described the accommodation and conditions as sub-human. Altogether, 98 men, 45 women—several pregnant—15 children and a four month old baby, are being housed in a small tin sports hall.

Christmas Island Shire President Dave Maclane told the media: “They are in horrendous conditions. There are 40 people to a toilet and shower. They are sleeping on stretchers and scrounged mattresses”. Many had diarrhoea and there was concern that cases could spread.

At the Curtin Airbase, the refugee tents are surrounded by three-metre high fences, red dust and desert scrub, smothered by heat and humidity. Average temperatures at this time of the year soar to 42 degrees Celsius. Equally hot conditions will prevail at Woomera during the coming summer.

While whipping up anti-refugee sentiments with headlines such as “Boatloads of Trouble” the media, apart from reporting the refugees' countries of origin, has kept the asylum-seekers anonymous. For example, nothing is written or spoken of the conditions inside Iraq, from where the majority of recent arrivals have fled.

Iraq is suffering economic and social devastation—a product of United States and United Nations economic sanctions imposed for the past nine years, relentless and ongoing bombing raids by the US and British aircraft and the legacy of the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91, which destroyed the country's infrastructure and created a social and environmental disaster.

According to a report released by UNICEF in August, children under five in southern and central Iraq are dying at more than twice the rate of 10 years ago. Infant mortality—deaths in the first year of life—has increased from 47 per 1,000 live births (1984-89) to 108 per 1,000 live births (1994-99).

The toxic impact of the depleted uranium used by the US military on the tips of anti-tank ammunition during the Gulf War is now emerging. Congenital birth defects are reported to be three times the level before the war. Overall cancer rates are now 4.6 times higher in the southern region of Iraq, and wives of Iraqi Gulf War veterans are three times more likely to suffer miscarriages than the average across Iraq.

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In a rare exception to the media blackout on the plight of the refugees, one report revealed that Iraqi asylum seeker Kasim Alsaidy and his 4-year-old son Mouhammed, who was suffering a brain tumor, made the risky trip by boat to Australia in June out of despair over the lack of medical treatment available in Iraq.

Alsaidy was forced to leave his wife and three daughters in Syria en route. He and Mouhammed landed on Ashmore Reef along with 50 other refugees. Following an operation performed on Mouhammed at Perth's children hospital, the pair now is literally imprisoned in a suburban apartment, constantly under guard by the immigration department while awaiting their fate after applying for asylum status. They are forbidden to make phone calls, even to the child's mother in Syria, and Alsaidy is unable to take his son for a walk without an escort.

The Labor Party opposition fully supports the Howard government in imposing these conditions, as it does the sanctions against Iraq.

In late March, the Howard government announced it was sending a warship to the Persian Gulf to help enforce the sanctions. HMAS Melbourne, with a crew of 210, was dispatched in April to join a US Naval task force for three months to assist in intercepting and boarding vessels suspected of carrying cargo to or from Iraq.

Both in sending a warship to the Gulf and in incarcerating refugees, the Howard government is following the lead of the previous Labor government. In 1994 the Keating government declared that any non-citizen in Australia without a visa was an “unlawful non citizen” who must be detained immediately and indefinitely, pending deportation. This declaration reversed the centuries-old principle of *habeas corpus* that no one can be imprisoned without being convicted by a court of an offence.

Labor Senator Jim McKiernan, a member of the joint committee on immigration, recently toured the overcrowded Port Hedland compound. After the visit McKiernan told the media: “It was a bit of a waste seeing all of that humankind just sitting around doing nothing, just waiting, waiting. And many of them will have many weeks of waiting before they get a decision”.

But the Labor leaders fully support this barbaric imprisonment, only highlighting its waste of human life in order to aid the government's as yet unsuccessful campaign to deter refugees from trying to flee to Australia.

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