

Refugees resort to hunger strike in remote Australian prison camp

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In a last ditch effort to draw attention to their plight, asylum-seekers imprisoned at a remote camp in Australia's far north-west have resorted to sewing their lips together to protest the deplorable conditions and denial of basic legal and democratic rights.

As many as a dozen refugees from Afghanistan took the desperate measure two weeks ago after being locked away for three months at the Curtin Airbase Detention Centre in northern Western Australia. They have been appalled by the conditions in the tents and portable huts of the hot, dusty and barren former airforce base, where temperatures reach 45 degrees Celsius at this time of year.

Altogether, several hundred refugees at the centre near Derby, 2,500 kilometres north of Perth, went on hunger strike. Even after three months, their applications for refugee status have not yet been processed and they have received no legal advice or counseling. They are demanding to be housed near a city and to have the right to come and go freely while their applications are considered. They are also demanding the right to apply for full refugee status, not the temporary three-year visas that the Howard government introduced late last year, after their arrival.

Last week detention centre staff threatened to end the protest physically by "applying treatment" to those who had sewn their lips together. Because the government and the media have imposed a blackout on the protest, it is not known how many are still refusing food and water. One woman was taken to hospital a week ago after suffering from dehydration.

Jackie King from the Refugee Council of Western Australia was reported as saying that the refugees had good reason for being upset. "As I understand, they weren't provided with legal advice nor with any counseling when they first arrived. They were just

basically placed in these very desolate and isolated places and told to wait," she said.

Some 1,147 people are forced to live at Curtin. Refugee advocacy organisations denounced the conditions at the prison camp when the Howard government opened it three months ago. A short time later, the government consigned asylum seekers to an even more scorched former military base at Woomera, in central Australia, after filling both Curtin and the 700-bunk Port Hedland Detention Centre.

Last year refugees at Port Hedland also held a number of protests against overcrowded and inhumane conditions, including hunger strikes, sit-ins and rooftop occupations. Some tried to escape into the surrounding desert.

The government and the mass media have attempted to ridicule and discredit the Curtin hunger strikers by describing their actions as "bizarre" and "self-mutilation". Not one media report has explained their cause or even hinted at the conditions that have led the refugees to such extreme measures. Scant coverage has been given to the protest despite the determined efforts of the detainees to make their case known.

Most of the refugees have travelled thousands of kilometres in the most hazardous conditions, seeking to escape persecution and poverty. They have been subjected to indefinite detention after perilous voyages in usually decrepit and unseaworthy vessels.

By the government's own statistics, nearly all are likely to be entitled to refugee status, even under the draconian standard of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which confines asylum to those fleeing from individual political, religious or ethnic persecution. For the 1998-99 year, 97 percent of Iraqi refugee claimants and 92 percent of Afghani asylum seekers were eventually granted the right to stay.

Yet West Australian Premier Richard Court denounced the hunger strikers for having the “nerve” to complain about their treatment. They should start showing some gratitude, he said. The implication of his remarks is that refugees should be afforded no rights whatsoever.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, having paid a fleeting visit to the Curtin Airbase and Port Hedland Detention Centres, declared the conditions to be “acceptable” and said no action would be taken to ease the overcrowding. In fact, he accused the imprisoned families of seeking to “intimidate” the government. “The Australian government will not respond to intimidation to change its policies,” he said. It is difficult to imagine a greater inversion of reality.

Ruddock also blamed “people smugglers” for allegedly misleading the refugees into thinking they would have the right to go free in Australia. Whatever the refugees were told by those making money from their misery, the prisoners are fighting for fundamental basic democratic rights.

The number of refugees arriving in Australia by boat has risen sharply in recent years from 157 in 1997-98 to 926 in 1998-99 and 2,200 for the five-month period from July 1999 to December 1999. The number of asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan grew to 1,200 and 1,100 respectively for the 1999 calendar year. These are small figures by international standards, but they indicate the increasing movement of people attempting to escape from authoritarian regimes and grinding poverty.

The government's response has been to demonise the refugees and treat them as escaped criminals who must be handed back to their jailers as quickly as possible. It has systematically stripped them of legal and democratic rights, including access to legal advice and to appeals from decisions by the government-appointed Refugee Review Tribunal.

There is no doubt that the new three-year temporary visa contravenes the Refugee Convention. People arriving by boat or without valid visas, but meeting all the other criteria for refugee status, will have no welfare entitlements, no automatic medical coverage and no right to apply for other family members to join them. Their right to work has been restricted, they cannot travel overseas and those wanting to study must pay full fees.

The government is closely collaborating with the most authoritarian regimes. Last year Ruddock held talks with the Indonesian regime on halting the movement of refugees, even after its armed forces had participated in the bloodbath that followed the East Timorese vote for secession in August.

At the beginning of this year Ruddock traveled to Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan to discuss operations against “people smugglers” and how to work jointly to establish the identity and origin of the refugees. In other words, the Australian government will be handing over lists of the names of refugees to the regimes from which they are fleeing.

During his visit to Turkey, for example, Ruddock met with Interior Minister Sadettin Tantan, Justice Minister Hikmet Sami Turk and the Minister of State responsible for Turks abroad. They struck agreements on exchanges of intelligence on people smuggling and illegal movements and continuing cooperation on the return of illegal entrants. The Australian government will fund a workshop for Turkish judges and prosecutors on the identification of people with refugee claims.

In its latest punitive move, the government has frozen the processing of all offshore refugee applications for the rest of the financial year. Seeking to pit the detainees against other refugee applicants, Ruddock claimed that the “boat people” would take up all the remaining places in the government's annual refugee quota of 12,000.

The government has also refused to rule out a fruit growing employers' proposal that detainees be forced to pick crops to pay for the cost of their arrest and imprisonment.



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