

Refugees face "hell" in Australia's offshore detention camps

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Over recent weeks, a number of media and other reports have shed light on the conditions for refugees under the Australian government's so-called "Pacific solution," which consists of militarily barring entry to asylum seekers and forcibly removing them to two remote islands—Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

In mid-December, news leaked out that a 31-year-old Middle Eastern woman detained in a temporary staging camp on Australia's Christmas Island had contracted typhoid. She was taken to the small island hospital, two of her children were quarantined and tested for the disease, while another remained in the detention compound.

The Health Department then disclosed that there had been 15 cases of serious disease in the Christmas Island camp in recent weeks, including hepatitis A, malaria and sexually transmitted diseases. Acting Immigration Minister Chris Ellison admitted that a number of refugees were suffering conjunctivitis and that four people were suspected of having tuberculosis (TB). He said they were being treated inside the Phosphate Hill camp, which holds 359 out of the 532 asylum seekers on the island.

Christmas Island was excised from Australia's migration zone, along with the Ashmore, Cartier and Cocos (Keeling) Islands, following the government's decision in late August to turn back the *Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter that had rescued 433 Afghan refugees. Since then, naval warships have forced at least three refugee boats back into Indonesian waters, detained more than 600 asylum seekers in the "excision zone" and transported another 1,000 to Nauru or Papua New Guinea under arrangements with their governments.

Because of this policy, Christmas Island, a small island 1,500 km off north-western Australia with less than 3,000 residents, has housed an increasing number of asylum seekers. Another 134 Sri Lankan and Vietnamese refugees have been detained on the Cocos Islands, another 1,000 km to the west.

The West Australian secretary of the Australian Nursing Federation, Mark Olsen, said facilities on Christmas Island were dangerous for asylum seekers and staff. He said some staff did not have access to running water, apart from a sink that is for toilet use. "The major concern is that they don't have even basic infrastructure to prevent an outbreak of infectious disease, such as typhoid or conjunctivitis."

A health professional, who recently visited the island, told the *Australian Financial Review* that circumstances were beyond belief. "My first impression was fundamental disbelief that these living conditions could exist in Australia, in a supervised way". Health workers described the conditions as "third world".

Several days after the typhoid revelation, Alice Tay, president of the government's own Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, wrote to Prime Minister John Howard raising concerns about the situation on Christmas Island. She said 172 asylum seekers were living in a cramped corrugated iron shed called the Sports Hall. The hall, the size of two basketball courts, was hot, humid, had no privacy and little natural light.

All the refugees, including 12 women and 28 children, were sleeping on narrow stretcher beds that sat 20 centimetres apart, taking up three quarters of the hall. Women and children were released from the hall for only two hours a day, while men could spend four hours in an enclosed outdoor area adjoining the hall. Until the beginning of December, asylum seekers were let out of the hall for just 20 minutes a day.

Tay said detainees could not watch television, listen to the radio or read newspapers. They were allowed to contact families via fax, but few of their families have access to a fax machine. Detainees had not been told their basic rights, such as legal representation and to contact consular and diplomatic representatives.

The government dismissed Tay's letter, and defended

the conditions on the grounds that the accommodation was temporary.

After reporting the health problems, Ellison used them to justify mandatory detention, arguing that tuberculosis is 30 times more prevalent in some of the countries that asylum seekers travel through. “Detention allows us to screen for diseases that pose a public health risk and provide relevant treatment to the detainees.”

Whether or not contagious diseases are contracted before refugees are detained, the government is seizing upon health concerns as another form of scapegoating asylum seekers, blaming them for their own detention. Such diseases are readily treatable within Australia. But instead of providing refugees with the best medical care, the government is locking them up in camps that are hot, cramped and lacking in facilities for proper hygiene and medical treatment, increasing the risks of spreading and prolonging the diseases.

TB is spread in the air through coughing, sneezing and speaking, most often with close day-to-day contact with someone with the disease. These are exactly the conditions that asylum seekers are forced to live in on Christmas Island and other offshore camps. The risk of spreading typhoid is greatly increased when ablution facilities are inadequate.

From Christmas Island, the detainees are likely to be dumped in the tiny Pacific state of Nauru. The Howard government this month paid the Nauru government \$10 million to take 400 more prisoners, on top of the 795 already there. Another 225 are on Manus Island, where several cases of malaria have been confirmed.

John Pace, a former UN High Commissioner for Refugees official, returned from Nauru in early December, and produced a report for Amnesty International, describing the camp there as “hell”.

“The asylum seekers are traumatised by the events and many show clear signs of vulnerability,” he reported. “It is often difficult to interview them.” Pace found clear symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including nervousness, anxiety, an aggressive attitude, muteness, distrust, withdrawal, and lack of focus and concentration. He often witnessed shivering of hands and outbursts of crying during interviews.

Pace said the mainly Afghan and Iraqi refugees had gone through major stress, having been rescued from sinking boats and holed up on the *Tampa* and then the *HMAS Manoora*, a naval troopship. The blow of not being able to land in Australia and hearing the news of the bombing of Afghanistan also had a psychological affect.

Asylum seekers were “unhappy with the heat and the way they are housed.” Detainees lived in huts, erected in the middle of a former sporting ground, made of corrugated iron, plastic sheeting and shade cloth on dirt floors. The crowded huts were infested with mosquitoes and offered little protection from the equatorial heat.

Pace met with Immigration Minister Ruddock in Sydney after returning from Nauru, but the minister was unmoved by his report. In fact, Ruddock cynically suggested that the asylum seekers would be even worse off in one of Australia’s internal detention centres, in semi-desert locations near Woomera, Port Hedland and Derby. Pace told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Ruddock had made a joke, while smiling and winking, that the refugees might prefer the domestic detention camps.

It is still unclear where the asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island will go once they are processed. Ireland has said it may take a small number of refugees but other countries are not willing to do so. According to UN spokeswoman Ellen Hansen, other governments regard the refugees as Australia’s responsibility.

Ruddock has since defended the “Pacific Solution” both at home and overseas. “We haven’t had a boat arrival now for one month,” he boasted to the BBC. In other words, the government is deliberately maintaining appalling conditions in the offshore camps, and the rest of its brutal policy, including the use of warships, in the hope of discouraging asylum seekers from fleeing to Australia.



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