

Afghan refugees stage desperate hunger strike in Australia

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Several hundred asylum seekers, most of them Afghan refugees who have been locked up for months, even years, by the Australian government in a remote prison camp, are into the eleventh day of a hunger strike that threatens to end in tragedy. The strike erupted last week at the notorious Woomera Detention Centre, located 500 kilometres (300 miles) from the nearest city in the middle of the South Australian desert. It follows two months of increasingly desperate protests by many of the centre's 860 inmates.

Last weekend, at least 70 Afghani hunger strikers, including three children aged 12, 14 and 15, began sewing their lips together in an effort to convey the extent of their plight. Since then several have collapsed unconscious in the searing desert heat—up to 42 degrees Celsius or 108 degrees Fahrenheit in the middle of the day—and been rushed to the local hospital. Around 40 others, including four children, have attempted simultaneous suicide, either by hanging themselves or by swallowing a toxic cocktail of painkillers and shampoo.

On Wednesday, a group of children removed from the centre for a daytime excursion passed a note to the media. It said that the situation was becoming “worst and worst” and that “every five minutes one person faints because of hunger”. “Some persons have been here for two years and still they don't know [if] they are going back to their country or they are being accepted... We ask Australian people to help us and tell the Government to give us freedom. Young people and teenagers are killing themselves here.”

Under the Australian government's inhuman mandatory detention policy, any asylum-seeker arriving in the country by boat, or without proper documentation, is automatically imprisoned. Many, including several hundred children, remain in virtual concentration camps for years. The government is under no obligation to provide them with a timely response, so thousands of refugees languish, with nothing to do, awaiting a decision.

Woomera, which was opened in 1999 on the site of a former missile testing station, is reputedly the worst, with inmates treated as criminals, surrounded by multiple layers of razor wire. Demonstrations and protests have broken out regularly, although the media rarely reports them due to the centre's isolation and the government's ban on access.

The present conflict began last November when the Howard government imposed a freeze on the processing of claims for refugee status by Afghani asylum seekers. Ruddock argued that the overthrow of the Taliban regime meant that conditions in Afghanistan had to be reassessed. The refugees were given no idea as to when this “reassessment” would take place, what its consequences could be or when the processing of their visa applications would recommence.

Dr Mohammed Alsalami, a member of the government's detention advisory committee, pointed out that 90 percent of Afghanis involved in the hunger strike were from the Hazara ethnic group which had been subjected to religious and social persecution for more than 20 years in Afghanistan—long before the Taliban regime came to power. Alsalami said the refugees, who had never been involved in protests before, were convinced they would continue to face persecution if they returned.

Ruddock imposed the processing freeze soon after the November federal election, when the Howard government regained office after running a campaign specifically aimed at stoking up anti-refugee prejudice. For the detainees, the decision was the last straw. On November 20, about 250 staged a protest yelling “visa, visa, visa”. Later that night, plumes of smoke and flames billowed over the prison camp as three buildings were set alight. In December, desperate inmates began mutilating themselves, followed by three nights of riots and struggles with security guards.

In a faxed statement released earlier this week by the Independent Council for Refugee Advocacy (ICRA) president Marion Le, the Afghani hunger strikers made an impassioned plea for international assistance.

“This protest is about freedom and basic human rights, it is no longer about visas,” their statement said.

“We are requesting that the international community intervene and remove us from Australia's barbaric immigration policy which locks men, women and children behind razor wires for months, even years at a time. We have come to Australia to escape persecution yet we find ourselves further persecuted by the Australian government. We are going to continue our hunger strike and sew our lips until we achieve our human rights.”

Welfare and human rights agencies have condemned the Howard government's treatment of the Afghani refugees. On Thursday, a letter to Ruddock signed by the United Nations Association of Australia, the Catholic Commission for Justice Development and Peace, World Mission and the St Vincent de Paul Society, among others, expressed deep concern at the worsening situation. "We are highly concerned that there will be deaths soon in this facility," it stated.

Australia's Human Rights Commissioner, Sev Ozdowski, who has already begun an inquiry into conditions inside Australia's detention centres, said the government appeared to be in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"The convention says governments should use all appropriate measures to protect the child from any form of physical or mental violence," Dr Ozdowski declared. "From what I have heard in the media, yes, we are breaching it ... when children in detention centres are witness to lip-sewing and violence, we are not doing all we agreed to under the convention."

In Geneva, Kris Janowski, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees commented: "We think that prolonged detention is unacceptable and unnecessary." Referring to the hunger strike, he remarked that it showed "how desperate these people are. The trouble stems from the detention." An Australian based researcher for Amnesty International told the media that he had interviewed about 30 former Woomera detainees. "People can put up with a lot if they know what is the outcome or if they have an idea of when a decision will be made. It is the uncertainty about the future which is the main determining factor in driving people mad."

In an unprecedented breach within government ranks, one of the government's most senior advisers on immigration resigned last Wednesday in protest at the government's actions. Neville Roach, appointed by Ruddock as chairman of the Council for Multicultural Australia, and chairman of the Business Advisory Council on migration said "compassion seem[ed] to have been thrown out the door". It was "impossible," he told the media, to continue to support the government because its policy was tearing at Australia's multicultural fabric and giving "comfort to the prejudiced side of human nature".

Over the past days refugees in prison camps in Victoria and Western Australia have begun protests, hunger strikes and suicide attempts in support of the Woomera strikers.

The government has responded with brutal indifference. Yesterday Prime Minister Howard accused the asylum seekers of "blackmail" and "moral intimidation" and emphasised that his government would not budge from its mandatory detention policy. He refused an offer by a number of church and welfare groups to provide accommodation to the Woomera refugees until their claims had been processed.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock contemptuously declared that if the protestors didn't like conditions at Woomera, they could go back to Afghanistan. Without a shred of evidence, he accused parents of forcing their children to

participate in the hunger strike, and then attacked them for failing to "fulfill their proper obligations as parents to their children." He went on to threaten to separate children involved in the protests from their parents.

Hunger strikers interviewed by telephone told reporters that Ruddock's claims were false. "Nobody would stitch their child's mouth. The children who are doing it are between 10 and 15 years old. They see their family doing it, so they do it," an Iranian refugee explained. A lawyer representing one of the women who had sewn her lips said her client had been behind bars with her husband and two children aged 8 and 9 for eight months. "Her children aren't developing... they're locked up behind huge fences, razor wire, in the middle of the desert. Take a look behind you—this is no environment to raise children in, this is no way to keep people, human beings, families."

The ICRA has indicated its preparedness to take legal action against Ruddock for failing in his duty of care towards child detainees. "Unaccompanied children are the direct responsibility of the minister—he is in loco parentis and responsible for their wellbeing. We will be looking at legal action on behalf of any unaccompanied children who have come to harm," said Marion Le.

Ruddock has continued to insist that the strike will have no impact on official decisions and ruled out visiting the centre. The handpicked head of the government's advisory group, former immigration minister John Hodges, warned after a visit to Woomera that it was a "distinct possibility" that someone would die, but added that it would be the refugees' own fault.

Nevertheless, in an effort both to stem the growing sense of public outrage and to pressure the strikers into abandoning their action, Ruddock ordered the release of five unaccompanied children from Woomera into foster care on Wednesday, and on Thursday the Department of Immigration resumed processing Afghani asylum claims. About 35 adult Woomera detainees, including one Afghani hunger striker, have been temporarily released "into the community."

But these manoeuvres are entirely cosmetic. Talks last night between Woomera refugee representatives and the detention advisory committee broke down, with the government refusing to allow the hunger strikers to move to another location.



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