

# Australia: Teenagers threaten suicide as refugee hunger strike escalates

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A hunger strike by hundreds of imprisoned asylum seekers against the Australian government escalated today with nine Afghan and Iraqi teenage refugees threatening to commit suicide unless authorities release them by Wednesday evening.

The boys, aged 14 to 17 years, have been held in barbaric conditions in the Woomera Detention Centre since arriving in Australia by boat, without their families, between six months and a year ago. Their lawyer, Rob McDonald, told the media that the youngsters are determined to drink poison or throw themselves off the prison's razor wire fence if they are not placed in alternative accommodation while their claims for refugee status are being processed.

Nine other unaccompanied minors have been fostered out in the past week, in a half-hearted attempt by the government to defuse the growing crisis. But the nine teenagers remain incarcerated, even though several of them have already been granted temporary visas, with no indication of when they can hope to get out. McDonald said that some of the boys had passed notes to the media last week appealing for support and had since been punished.

Prime Minister John Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock have responded with predictable disdain for the children's fate. Ruddock, as part of his continuing campaign to stigmatise asylum seekers and their legal representatives, implied that McDonald's statement was a hoax.

"We're dealing with human rights advocates who purport to be acting for the detainees and they've made a lot of comments at various times which don't reflect reality," he said, without offering a single example of false reporting.

Howard didn't bother to address the boys' threat at all, simply reiterating, as he departed for a trip to the United States, that his government's policy of mandatory

detention for all asylum seekers would continue unchanged.

But Paris Aristotle, a member of the government's own Immigration Detention Advisory Group who, unlike Ruddock or Howard, has visited the Woomera Detention Centre during the past week, said it was highly possible that the youngsters had made such a pact.

"I certainly believe it's possible that there are threats of suicide pacts, I mean these are daily occurrences at the moment, these sorts of things," he told reporters.

According to lawyers and refugee groups, the number of Woomera detainees participating in the hunger strike has increased to 370, with refugees from Afghanistan being joined by Iranians and others. The strikers' demands are to be removed from Woomera, a living hell-hole located in the middle of the South Australian desert, in a hot, treeless dustbowl, and for their visa applications be processed.

The government, which has tried to downplay the extent of the protest since it began two weeks ago, maintains there are just 259 involved, up from 181 a few days ago. But it has been forced to admit that the strike has spread to three other detention centres, where inmates have begun refusing food, stitching their lips and committing acts of self-harm in solidarity with the Woomera hunger strikers.

The Immigration Department confirmed that on Sunday, six refugees at the Curtin centre in Western Australia swallowed poison, while at Woomera an Afghan mother of two tried to hang herself, a male detainee drank shampoo and three children were taken to hospital after acts of "self-harm".

A former Woomera doctor, Bernice Pfitzner, who worked in the centre from October 2000 to June 2001, explained that these types of acts were not new.

"During the time [when I was there] there were instances of these attempted suicides and self-harm that

would be twice a month,” she said. “Now I hear from sources still there that hanging, slashing and lip sewing is an almost daily occurrence.”

Anxiety and depression were far worse than the authorities were prepared to admit, she said. Once people hit the six-month mark, they started to go “mad” in the environment.

Babak Ahmadi, a geologist from Iran who was released after 20 months in Woomera, asked: “How can a person sit in detention in the middle of the desert for two years? Our emotions are crushed. Most people are mentally sick.”

The media has been barred from visiting any of the country’s five immigrant detention centres or speaking to detainees since the hunger strike began. At Woomera, journalists have been allowed no closer than 750 metres from the barbed wire fence that encircles the camp, forced to rely on government press releases or statements from lawyers, as they come and go, the only members of the public allowed in.

Last Saturday night, around 200 asylum seekers climbed onto the roof of the Woomera centre, holding placards and yelling “visa”, “visa” in an effort to communicate their demands. One refugee threw himself onto the razor wire fence in full view of the media and was rushed to hospital, where he remains in a serious condition. In response, the government called in extra security guards who proceeded to force reporters back another 200 metres. Some objected, demanding to know why, and on what authority, whereupon ABC reporter Natalie Larkins was arrested for “failing to leave Commonwealth land”.

The ABC has announced it will “vigorously defend” the charge brought against Larkins and the Media Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) has demanded the dropping of the charges, the reversal of restrictions on access and accused the government of suppressing information.

“In the eyes of the international community we’re looking more like a military dictatorship than a free democracy,” commented Dana Worley, MEAA South Australian branch secretary.

Federal secretary Chris Warren told ABC radio, “It’s frankly unbelievable that in this century the government would be resorting [to] these sorts of laws to prevent public reporting and debate on such an important issue. The government is clearly getting in the way of the public knowing what’s going on.”

Paul Boylan, another lawyer representing Woomera asylum seekers, says the administration has begun

improving aspects of the site in the expectation that the media will eventually gain access. Fresh paint has been applied, and pathways have been lined with bark chips, new trees and shrubs.

Boylan insisted that he knew “what goes on in there and it’s appalling... It’s also shocking that our government would want to hide the truth from its own citizens.”

International condemnation of the Howard government’s detention policy is intensifying. Articles have appeared in the past days, in sections of the British, European and US media, unfavourably comparing conditions in Woomera to those being meted out by the US government to Taliban and Al-Qaida prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

On Monday the Red Cross published a letter in the national daily, the *Australian*, raising concerns for the physical, emotional and psychological welfare of the protesters. Secretary general Martine Letts declared that the organisation was disturbed about how the detainees’ actions were being portrayed—that acts of human despair were being depicted as culturally based.

Amnesty International has issued a statement branding mandatory detention a “failure” and calling on the government to release, at the very least, families with children.

“Hunger strikes, self-harm and attempted suicides have obvious roots in extreme desperation,” the human rights organisation declared.

The government’s refusal to accommodate the asylum seekers’ most minimal demands threatens an appalling tragedy. The spectre of multiple deaths has prompted frantic efforts within ruling circles to work out some kind of exit strategy for Howard and Ruddock. While remaining a staunch supporter of mandatory detention, which the Australian Labor Party introduced in 1992, Labor leader Simon Crean called on Saturday for unaccompanied children to be fostered out, and for mothers and children to be relocated into “more appropriate housing”. Likewise, the government’s Immigration Detention Advisory Group yesterday made a tactical retreat, recommending to the government that the Woomera Detention Centre, which it described as “extremely harsh”, be shut down.



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