

Australian asylum seekers in desperate hunger strike

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Asylum seekers imprisoned at Australia's remote Woomera detention centre have entered the third week of a hunger strike, while others have escaped into the surrounding semi-desert country. Their desperate actions are a last resort as they protest against their indefinite detention and the Howard government's latest plan to force Afghan refugees to return to their war-ravaged country.

Up to 190 of Woomera's 215 current detainees have been involved in the hunger strike which began on June 24. All but a few elderly detainees and children have refused to eat. Among the 50 children inside Woomera, some as young as nine have reportedly joined the fast against their parents' will.

About 15 of the detainees have sewed their lips together to emphasise their refusal to eat. One has collapsed and was taken to the Woomera Township for medical treatment. An Iranian detainee used his own blood to write "freedom" on a camp wall.

Detainees from Iran and Iraq have joined the hunger strike in solidarity with the Afghani asylum seekers and to expose the conditions in which refugees are held for months and years at Woomera. The remote former rocket-testing site often experiences overnight winter temperatures of minus 4 degrees Celsius.

The hunger strikers issued a public statement accusing the Australian government of barbarism. "As humans we are privileged to liberty of life. The prejudiced medieval-like policy should be eliminated in this 21st Century, which is not suitable to give a developed and benevolent nation. In this camp the persecution has approached the pinnacle of cruelty."

Just days before the hunger strike began; Woomera's Afghan detainees signed a pact to reject a repatriation deal between the Howard government and the Karzai administration in Kabul. Under the agreement, refugees who fled Afghanistan's war, repression and poverty are

now threatened with forcible return. The Howard government, which is determined to exclude nearly all Afghani refugees, has declared that it will deport those who do not accept an offer of \$A2,000 and a flight to Afghanistan.

Returning Afghans would be at risk of their lives in a country where US-led military forces continue to bomb and kill civilians in the name of the "global war on terrorism." Basic infrastructure has been devastated and ethnic conflict and persecution continues. Canberra's hypocrisy is exposed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's warning to Australian citizens not to visit Afghanistan because of the extreme dangers posed by the country's ongoing conflicts.

Previously, immigration authorities rejected the applications of a number of asylum seekers, claiming that they were lying about coming from Afghanistan. Now that the government has determined that the country is "safe," the former "non-Afghans" are all being accepted as Afghans so they can be forced to leave.

Ramatulla, an Afghan detainee, told the *Australian*: "They are all being accepted as genuine Afghans just by being (offered a ticket home) to Afghanistan. If they were genuine Afghans, why weren't they granted protection visas one year before? It is a cruel joke. All of the Afghan detainees are opposing the treaty offered by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock in which he offers money for no security of life to go home."

At midnight on June 28, four days after the hunger strike began, 35 detainees—28 from Afghanistan, six from Iran and one from Iraq—broke out of the Woomera camp, fleeing with the aid of anti-detention protesters. The protesters, who stated that they entered the camp's outer perimeter to conduct interviews with detainees, described the breakout as a spontaneous action initiated by the asylum seekers.

Immigration Minister Ruddock and his officials have

responded to the hunger strike and escapes by cracking down on detainees. While attempting to discredit the hunger strikers by claiming that some were accepting food from staff, Ruddock reinforced a ban on media access to the detainees, cutting off all phones in the camp and banning visits by lawyers.

According to Jeremy Moore of the Woomera Lawyers group, which has been assisting the detainees, some hunger strikers have been refused their normal medication and taunted with food. “Some of the guards have been walking around in the middle of the night and offering them food and eating in front of them and basically treating them with disrespect,” he told reporters.

Together with the South Australian state Labor government, the federal government has mounted an extensive police manhunt for the escapees and the protesters who are alleged to have aided them. A helicopter, plane, vehicles and dogs have been used to hunt down escapees over a 200,000-square kilometre area. Both the government and media have depicted the asylum seekers as criminals even though they fled to Australia to escape persecution and oppression.

The police recaptured five asylum seekers immediately and later found four escapees in the desert, 400 kilometres north of Woomera. After surviving three nights of below freezing temperatures without food, another two asylum seekers gave themselves up. Another escapee is thought to be stranded in the desert. Ten detainees, including boys aged 12 and 14, remain unaccounted for.

The plight of the boys is particularly tragic. Their father was granted refugee status and is living in Sydney, but they and their mother have been denied asylum and marked for deportation, splitting the family.

Police have arrested four protesters, who face up to 10 years jail for “aiding and abetting” the escapees. In the course of the operation, police seized a vehicle at a bush campsite and scoured it for detainees’ fingerprints, without charging the eight campers.

Ruddock has demanded that the “full force of the law” be applied, including jail terms of up to five years for the escapees themselves. Under laws passed last September in the wake of the *Tampa* crisis, refugees convicted of escaping can be stripped of their rights to apply for asylum.

Even while issuing these threats, Ruddock callously declared that if escapees perished in the desert, it would be the fault of the protesters. In reality, the responsibility for these acts of desperation lies directly with the government and its policy of mandatory detention of

asylum seekers.

All the Woomera detainees have been incarcerated for at least 10 months and some for over two years. Half have exhausted their appeal rights. In many cases, like that of the young escapees, some family members have been granted visas while others have been refused. According to the Catholic welfare agency, Centacare, the boys are “not an isolated example”.

The current hunger strike is the second within six months at Woomera. In January, hundreds of asylum seekers participated in a 16-day fast, ending it only when the government’s Immigration Detention Advisory Group promised a resumption of visa processing for Afghan refugees and other concessions. The government admitted that it had frozen Afghan applications, extending detention for months, in order to argue that the installation of the Karzai regime meant it was safe to return to Afghanistan.

In another bid for freedom, 50 detainees broke out of Woomera at Easter during a demonstration outside the camp’s fences. Eleven of those escapees are still on the run and are reportedly hiding in Melbourne and Sydney. Some who were captured took part in the latest breakout.

The number of detainees in Woomera has dropped from 950 to 215 since January. While some have been granted refugee status, the government refuses to state how many have been deported or removed to one of the other five holding camps across Australia. The entire process has been characterised by a flagrant disregard for basic democratic rights and contemptuous indifference to the plight of refugees whose only “crime” has been to seek to escape oppression and hardship to obtain a better life for themselves and their families.



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