

Treatment of refugees exposes Australian government hypocrisy on Iraq war

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15 February 2003

Even as Australia's Howard government last week cited human rights abuses committed by Saddam Hussein's regime to justify joining a war against Iraq, it continues to punish hundreds of Iraqi refugees for the "crime" of seeking asylum in Australia.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer referred to the beatings, rape and torture of political prisoners, claiming that critics of Saddam Hussein face having their tongues amputated. He also pointed to United Nations estimates that some 15,000 Iraqi citizens have disappeared without any explanation.

Downer's discovery of the plight of the Iraqi people coincides exactly with the government's efforts to overcome overwhelming public opposition to its commitment of Australian troops to a US-led invasion. Its current posturing differs markedly to the treatment meted out to refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan (where Australian troops were dispatched in 2001) during the past few years.

In October 2001, when 238 mostly Iraqi men, women and children drifted into Australian waters on a leaky vessel, the government ordered a naval warship to turn the vessel around. Using capsicum spray and cattle prods to subdue the refugees, military personnel escorted the boat back into Indonesian waters. Three Iraqi men were drowned when the boat sank off the coast of West Timor. When the media broke the story months later the Defence Minister contemptuously declared: "Well, we're protecting our borders. That's the point."

Since refusing entry to the 433 Afghan refugees aboard the MV Tampa in August-September 2001, the government has turned away thousands of asylum seekers or transported them to holding camps on Nauru, Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and Australia's Christmas Island. Backed by the Labor Party opposition, Howard and his ministers have flouted international law in their unrelenting drive to prevent refugees from reaching Australian shores.

In the most tragic and contentious case so far, evidence continues to emerge that the government consciously ignored the plight of 400 asylum seekers from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine and Algeria, who were crowded onto a small, unseaworthy fishing boat, now known as SIEV X, trying to make the journey from Indonesia to Australia. The boat capsized, and 353 of the refugees, including 150 children, drowned without any rescue being mounted.

Despite opposition from numerous refugee advocacy, medical and human rights bodies, hundreds of Iraqi and Afghan refugees

remain incarcerated in isolated detention centers, many for several years. Others, granted Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), are forced to live in a state of perpetual anxiety, unsure as to when they may face immediate deportation. The physical and psychological toll exacted by the government's policy was highlighted by the suicide of Habibullah Wahedy on February 3 near Adelaide in South Australia, after immigration officials said they would deport him if he did not accept "voluntary" repatriation to war-torn Afghanistan.

Before granting him temporary refugee status almost three years ago, the government detained Wahedy for six months in the Port Hedland detention centre. On his release, Wahedy, a radiologist, worked with 50 other Afghans in a meat works, but his TPV barred him from reunion with his wife and three children in Afghanistan. Dale West, executive director of the Catholic welfare agency Centrecare Adelaide, said it was unlikely that Wahedy would have committed suicide if he had gained permanent residency.

Refugee advocates have raised concerns about the health and welfare of 8,600 refugees on TPVs, many of whom are likely to have their visas cancelled by the government in coming months. Since 1999, despite having proven they fled persecution and fear for their lives, refugees have been restricted to three-year TPVs, which deny them all basic rights, including security of residence, family reunion and essential social services.

The government is now trying to deport all Afghan TPV holders. As far back as December 2001, while US forces were still bombing Afghanistan, the government struck a bargain with the Karzai regime to repatriate Afghan refugees. All processing of applications made by Afghan asylum seekers being held in detention centres was halted.

There are currently 1,287 asylum seekers, including 139 children, in mainland detention centres, and around 520 in camps on Nauru and Manus Island. The numbers have declined from highs of several thousand because, since the sinking of the SIEV X, not a single refugee boat has reached Australian shores. Hundreds of refugees have been held for more than 12 months, and most have exhausted the few avenues of legal appeal open to them.

The majority of the mainland centres are located in semi-desert areas where summer temperatures regularly top 40 degrees Celsius (108 degrees Fahrenheit). Port Hedland is situated about 1,600 kilometres northwest of Perth, on the edge of the Great Sandy

Desert, while Woomera sits in a red dustbowl region in South Australia.

Baxter, a new camp, was recently established in a former air force base 400 kilometres north of Adelaide. Inmates describe it as a hi-tech concentration camp. It holds 221 detainees, housed in circular compounds. None of the buildings have outward-looking windows and the prisoners are constantly monitored by cameras and surrounded by a 9,000-volt electric fence. Remote-controlled electronic doors and gates separate the compounds.

In December, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, released a report condemning the centres and likening them to prisons. “[C]ombining mandatory, automatic, indiscriminate and indefinite detention without real access to court challenge is not practised by any other country in the world,” it stated.

The UN report accused Australia of using detention as a “deterrent” in defiance of the international Refugee Convention, which states that governments must not attempt to discourage, punish or discriminate against refugees who arrive without permission. It also found that the Migration Act contravened international law by barring any judicial review of detention.

The UN group, however, did not demand that asylum seekers be released. Instead, it meekly called for a time limit on detention and for inmates to be allowed a legal review of their status. Even so, the government immediately rejected the report, denouncing it as “flawed”.

Since late December, the government’s policies, along with intolerable conditions, have fuelled a series of desperate protests that have rapidly encompassed all the detention centres.

On Christmas Eve, protests broke out at the Statehouse camp on Nauru after a Nauruan police officer slapped an Iraqi detainee who was demonstrating, with six other women, against their continued incarceration while their husbands lived in Australia. In the ensuing conflict, according to an SBS *Dateline* television report, Australian Protective Service (APS) officers and Nauruan police pelted detainees with rocks.

Immigration officials then abandoned the camp, leaving the detainees with no running water or medical facilities. The television program reported that APS officers now drop a small number of food parcels at the front gates.

On December 27, a fire allegedly started by detainees at Baxter became the starting point for protests in five of the seven mainland detention centres. Three other fires were lit on December 29, leaving 79 rooms destroyed in total.

After news of the fires reached asylum seekers at Port Hedland, a high security isolation area was incinerated. The following day at Woomera eight ablution blocks, two dining rooms and 33 accommodation huts were burnt.

On December 31, more than 40 detainees on Christmas Island, 1,500 km off the northwest coast, took over a compound and burnt their sleeping tents. The same day, fires broke out and windows were smashed at the Villawood detention centre in Sydney’s western suburbs. Several detainees stole a car and attempted to ram it through the centre gates.

A Villawood detainee told the *Sydney Morning Herald* the fire protests were “not a riot” but “a statement” against the

government’s cruel and inhumane policies. “It’s been on the cards for a long time,” he said. “We can’t live in these conditions.”

The government responded with arrests, deportations and other repressive measures. Security guards, state police and riot squads were mobilised and detainees strip-searched at Baxter, Woomera and Port Hedland. Those who resisted this treatment at Woomera and Baxter were tear-gassed. At Woomera, detainees were handcuffed, held on an outdoor basketball court in the blazing sun for two days and denied water for long periods. Over 40 Australian Federal Police officers were assigned to investigate the fires.

Not to be outdone, the state Labor governments in South Australia and Western Australia called for the army to be brought in to crush the protests and any future demonstrations.

But discontent and resentment has reached boiling point. On February 3, a desperate escape attempt from Woomera led to a high-speed car chase through the desert. Three people broke into the centre and attacked approaching guards as 15 asylum seekers fled. Six inmates managed to escape, five of whom were captured after a three-day police manhunt. An Iraqi, an Iranian and an Afghan were charged with escaping from custody.

The government has seized upon the fires and escapes to brand the asylum seekers as criminals and implement further crackdowns. Thirty-four Sri Lankan detainees on Christmas Island, accused of participating in the protests, were deported in early January.

At least 35 refugees alleged to have been involved in the mainland fires have been jailed in state prisons, including 15 at Sydney’s maximum security Silverwater facility. Six have been charged with a range of offences, including malicious damage, attempting to escape custody and threatening a Commonwealth officer. They face jail sentences of up to 10 years if found guilty.

Another 29 have not been charged with any offence, in clear violation of their rights. Department of Immigration authorities have refused to say whether they will be charged and brought to trial or transferred back to the detention centres. Attorney-General Daryl Williams declared on January 4 that they could simply be held indefinitely.

Despite its efforts to vilify the refugees involved, responsibility for the events of the past six weeks rests squarely with the Howard government. Wahedy’s suicide, the eruption of protests and the attempted escapes are all products of desperation caused by inhuman treatment and the denial of the most basic democratic rights.



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