

Desperation fuels hunger strikes in Australian refugee camps

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For the fifth time in four years, sheer desperation at their indefinite incarceration and repeated acts of official brutality have led asylum seekers to resort to hunger strikes at Australian detention centres. Refugees locked in isolation cells at the remote Port Hedland prison camp in northern Western Australia began refusing to take food or water in early December. On December 10, detainees launched similar action on the tiny Pacific Island of Nauru, where Australian military ships transported them more than two years ago.

The immediate trigger for the Port Hedland hunger strike was a series of attacks on protests inside the camp, culminating in a full-scale assault by about 100 West Australian state police armed with tear gas and batons on December 5. Many of the refugees have been in detention for three or four years, two men recently reached their fifth year and one Iranian detainee is about to spend his sixth Christmas behind Port Hedland's razor wire.

Most fled persecution in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the Howard government has flatly refused to recognise them as refugees, making the ludicrous claim that it is safe for them to return. They have languished for months with no basic rights and nothing to do, except pursue fruitless legal appeals. Their fears of deportation have heightened since a December 12 High Court ruling that the government can remove rejected asylum seekers from the country, regardless of the likelihood of death or torture.

Tensions rose throughout November as numbers of detainees held strikes, refused to collect garbage and staged other protests over their conditions. The garbage strike broke out when a member of a family that had been split between the Port Hedland camp and the Perth detention centre, about 1,300 kilometres away, heard that a family member was injecting himself with a harmful substance. Another protest was provoked by the indignity of being handcuffed at a doctor's appointment. Then an Afghan man occupied a rooftop for a day and a night because he was denied dental treatment. Earlier, an Iranian refugee was forced to pull out his own tooth after waiting for six months in severe pain for a dental appointment.

The final straw came on December 4, when immigration department officials refused entry to a group of Catholic schoolgirls who had travelled for two days from Mandurah,

south of Perth, to visit detainees with whom they had been corresponding. Officials declared that the girls might be raped, sparking an outraged response, with about 40 detainees barricading themselves on a rooftop. Prison guards who stormed the building were initially driven back. The next evening, baton-wielding riot police gassed and attacked the protesters, dragging 24, including teenagers, off to Juliet Block, the isolation compound.

The government branded the prisoners as "rioters" and rejected calls by refugee advocacy and church groups for an independent inquiry into the incident. In response, the refugees locked in Juliet Block launched a hunger strike. On December 14, a Uniting Church representative reported that five of the prisoners were continuing to refuse to eat. "I believe that the people in the general compounds are very concerned about those people who are in the isolation block," she said, adding that the Immigration Department refused to say how long they would be held in Juliet Block.

On Nauru, 34 Afghan men and one Pakistani refugee are in the second week of a hunger strike that has already seen 14 men stretchered to hospital. Two have discharged themselves twice and returned to the protest each time. They have been refusing any treatment but once they lose consciousness, doctors rehydrate them using intravenous drips and glucose. At least four have sewn their lips together and some have begun urinating blood, a sign of kidney failure.

The men are seeking to draw attention to their plight on the hot, barren island where 325 asylum seekers have been shipped by the Howard government since the *Tampa* refugees were infamously turned away from Australia in late August 2001. Despite many being given refugee status by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the UN body that agreed to take charge of the Australian-financed facility, only a handful have been allowed into Australia or other countries. Most of the 284 detainees, including 93 children, still on Nauru are Afghan Hazaras, who were persecuted by the former Taliban regime and remain in grave danger in the US-occupied and war-torn country.

In a declaration issued on December 10, the hunger strikers said they had adopted the slogan "freedom or death". "When we were in our own country, we were persecuted in different

ways by atrocious rulers and governments but now we are in the Australian-made detention centres, we don't think that we have been treated better than what the Taliban and other cruel governments did with us," they wrote, "The Taliban was persecuting and killing people without any kind of fear and the government of Australia is pushing the people back toward death without thinking of what will happen to them."

After receiving phone calls from the Nauru detainees, Hassan Ghulam, president of the Hazara Ethnic Society in Brisbane, said the hunger strikers were determined not to back down. "After waiting patiently for more than two years they want a decision—a resolution of their situation," he said in a media statement. "The current crisis must be considered against the background of nine deaths in Australian immigration detention, and particularly the death of a young Hazara man on Nauru last year shortly after he received his refusal decision and the suicide of a Hazara man in Murray Bridge [South Australia] after receiving the DIMIA [Immigration Department] decision that he should go back to Afghanistan."

Howard has attempted to blackguard the hunger strikers, calling for an investigation into reports that they have coerced their children into joining the fast. Both the IOM and Ghulam have emphatically denied the allegation. Ghulam said women and children are sitting with the hunger strikers in a show of solidarity.

Little has been reported in the Australian media on the appalling treatment of the refugees on Nauru. Earlier this year, a former IOM psychiatrist on Nauru, Dr Maarten Dormaar, reported that 20 to 30 percent of the adult men had developed acute mental health problems, especially depression and anxiety, because of their prolonged detention. "They aren't even allowed to cook their own meals, they stay close together in container-like barracks with tin roofs, in tropical temperatures and they are not permitted to leave the camp. They are forced to do nothing."

In line with the government's policy of forced removal, Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone has washed her hands of the hunger strikers' fate. "It's not in Australian territory, it's on Nauru, and being run by other people. If someone doesn't want to be there, they can go home."

Her comments fly in the face of the obvious fact that the Australian government placed the refugees in detention on Nauru, cajoled and bribed the Nauru government to set up detention camps and has refused to allow most of the prisoners into Australia. As for their supposed freedom to "go home," refugee advocates have reported that several Hazara people recently sent back to Afghanistan were killed in Mazar-i-Sharif, precisely because they had sought asylum in Australia.

Vanstone's remarks underscore the Howard government's open contempt for the 1951 Refugee Convention, which bans the return of asylum seekers to countries where they will face death or other forms of persecution. In another horror story of forced removal from Australia, both Kuwait and Sudan have

refused entry to a Kuwaiti-born asylum seeker whose parents were Sudanese. After being deported from Australia through South Africa on December 13, he has been shunted between South African and Tanzanian airports for days, without money for food, water or a place to sleep.

Refugee groups and lawyers Eric Vadarlis and Julian Burnside are seeking a writ in the Victorian Supreme Court to release and compensate the Nauru detainees, arguing that the government has falsely imprisoned them. In comments to the media, Vadarlis likened Nauru to Guantanamo Bay, where the US government has incarcerated alleged "enemy combatants" and claimed that they are outside the jurisdiction of the American courts.

Despite many expressions of widespread public concern over the hunger strike, the government is hardening its stance. None of the previous major hunger strikes—1999 in Port Hedland, February 2000 at Curtin, January 2002 at Woomera and July 2002 at Woomera—succeeded in modifying the government's mandatory detention policy. But in order to end the 16-day strike in January 2002, which attracted significant public sympathy, the government felt compelled to call in its Immigration Detention Advisory Group (IDAG) to broker a deal.

Under that settlement, the hunger strikers agreed to end their fast in return for the government's promise to lift a three-month freeze on processing visa applications from Afghan refugees. The government had stopped all applications, claiming that the installation of the US-backed Karzai regime had rendered Afghanistan safe. Its back down amounted to an admission that many refugees would be in danger if they returned. Nevertheless it has continued its former practice of denying them asylum. Now, nearly two years later, it is simply refusing to take any responsibility for the hunger strikers' lives.

In an attempt to defuse the new crisis, Labor's immigration spokesman Stephen Smith has called for the IDAG to intervene again. Significantly, Smith voiced no opposition to the government's policy, or its treatment of the hunger strikers, simply expressing the hope that the IDAG could encourage them to return to Afghanistan "voluntarily" in due course. His proposal underscores Labor's determination, under new leader Mark Latham, to ape the government's ruthless stance on so-called "border protection".



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