

Nauru hunger strikers left to face death

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Despite a doctor's warning that asylum seekers could soon die if they continue their 20-day-old hunger strike in an Australian-financed detention camp on the Pacific island of Nauru, the Howard government has hardened its stance, insisting that it will not make the slightest concession to the desperate prisoners. Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone declared this week: "The government has made it very clear all along that it's no way to get a visa in terms of starving yourself to death."

Vanstone has not only refused to consider granting protection visas to any of the remaining 284 mainly Afghan refugees, including 93 children, who have been incarcerated on the island for more than two years. She has flatly rejected the hunger strikers' offer to call off their action in return for a meeting with the government, UN officials and refugee lobby groups next month to review their cases.

More than 40 men have joined the strike, which began on December 10 when nine asylum seekers started refusing food and water. Nauru's small, under-staffed hospital is dangerously overburdened, with asylum seekers passing out and being stretchered to the emergency unit regularly. Hunger strikers who have been re-hydrated intravenously have rejoined the strike, under conditions of 30-degree Celsius temperatures and high humidity.

Vanstone's stand makes clear that the government is prepared to go to any lengths, even the deaths of detainees, in order to maintain its "Pacific Solution" of militarily barring access to all refugee boats and expelling or transporting their passengers to Indonesia or Pacific islands. In flagrant breach of the international Refugee Convention, the government is determined to block or deter refugees from seeking asylum in Australia, denying them their basic rights under international law.

Vanstone railed against refugee advocates who have been attempting to negotiate an end to the hunger strike. She accused them of "encouraging the protesters to hold out for longer". But it is the detainees themselves who have vowed to continue their fast, because of the

unbearable predicament they face, whether they remain imprisoned on Nauru or are forcibly returned to Afghanistan.

Mohammad Ali Amiri, a camp leader, told *Nauru Wire* that the strikers had told him: "If we go back we will be killed there, and if we stay here we will be killing our time and wasting our life in Nauru. We don't need this bad life to stay in this situation, so it is better we die by hunger strike in here." One hunger striker, Arif Haleemy, reiterated their slogan: "Either we die or we are released from camp."

Dr Keiran Keke, the head of medical services at the Nauru hospital accused the Australian government of abandoning the strikers and leaving his under-resourced hospital to cope. Hospital staff were already working on their days off. He told Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio: "There is concern that if our resources are stretched further then some [hunger strikers] may slip through the loop and there is a risk that someone could die."

Hassan Ghulam, president of the Hazara Ethnic Society of Australia, who is in constant contact with the detainees, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that water desalination plants on Nauru allow for only two hours of fresh water per day. Even that water can have a high salt content. He was concerned that the hospital was re-hydrating the strikers with this water, which could lead to long-term health problems. Along with dehydration, the hospital was treating asylum seekers for malnutrition and kidney complaints, while some men were urinating blood.

Ghulam described the terrible conditions in the two detention camps on Nauru, a former Australian colony with a population of 12,000. There is no air conditioning. Asylum seekers sleep under shade-cloth annexes at night in hot tropical conditions. Decades of phosphate mining have created major environmental problems. Wind blows harmful phosphate dust from the largely disused mines onto men, women and children in the Topside Camp. The open-air kitchen is completely exposed to phosphate dust. Yet, the camps do not have a qualified doctor.

No doubt acting under instructions from Canberra to block any scrutiny of the camps, Nauru's government has rejected Ghulam's two attempts to obtain a visa to visit the detainees. Not a single visit by a lawyer, refugee group, doctor or journalist has been permitted for months.

Although the Nauruan administration formally exercises political power, the Howard government controls its purse strings. The island is totally reliant on Australian aid, including the \$30 million it has been paid over the past two years for holding the asylum seekers. In mid-December, Canberra sent \$1.2 million to Nauru just so that it could pay its public servants before Christmas.

The Australian government has piled one lie upon another to deflect away from its responsibility for the plight of the hunger strikers. Initially, Vanstone argued that their fate had nothing to do with Australia. She said Nauru was not Australian territory and the Australian government did not run the camps.

This claim soon became untenable. The Howard government used military warships to transport the refugees to Nauru, pressured the bankrupt local administration to house detention facilities and hired a UN agency, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to run the camps. Although the IOM makes the refugee status determinations, even if it classifies detainees as refugees, there is no guarantee that any other country will admit them. In effect, it is still the Howard government that decides whether they obtain asylum.

Vanstone then sent a two-man delegation to Nauru on December 22 and 23, ostensibly to report on the condition of the strikers. Her choice of representatives—John Hodges, a former Liberal immigration minister, and Gholam Aboss, an Afghan supporter of the government's line—made it obvious that she had no intention of trying to resolve the protest. All the delegates did was ask the men to end the fast. After speaking to the delegation, Vanstone provocatively declared that “the hunger strikers appear to be in remarkably good condition”.

The government has declared that the asylum seekers—mainly members of Afghanistan's long-persecuted Hazara minority—are not “real refugees” because it insists that it is now safe for them to return to strife-torn Afghanistan. Numerous sources have contradicted this claim. Even Afghanistan's ambassador to Australia, Mahmoud Saikal, said the country's security was poor and it lacked adequate housing. He asked Australia to accept the asylum seekers “because if our refugees and asylum seekers return and there is poverty

there and we haven't got much to offer, then that becomes a factor in the lack of security in Afghanistan itself.”

Furthermore, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs warns against Australians travelling to Afghanistan. “Warlords control many areas and ... some Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters remain in parts of the country,” its travel advisory states. Australians travelling outside Kabul “should consider permanent armed protection” and be wary of the “prevalence of unexploded landmines throughout the country”. Yet, the government is telling Afghan asylum seekers that if they do not return “voluntarily” it will continue to lock them in detention indefinitely or possibly return them forcibly.

Reports continue to emerge of deaths of asylum seekers sent back to Afghanistan. One former Afghan detainee, Mohammed Mussa Nazari was recently murdered in Malistan, Ghazni province. Federal Independent MP Peter Andren said refugee groups had given him reports that between seven and ten Afghans ejected by the Australian government on December 1 had been executed after arriving in Afghanistan.

Just before Christmas, the Howard government underscored its intransigence by opposing an application in the Victorian Supreme Court for an expedited hearing of a case in which two Melbourne lawyers, Eric Vadarlis and Julian Burnside, are seeking the release of the Nauru detainees, together with compensation for false imprisonment.

The lawyers argued that because of the hunger strike and the circumstances of the detention in Nauru the case should be given priority. The court agreed, but set a date of January 15, by which time hunger strikers may have died or suffered irreversible damage to their health. The government was adamant that even that date was too early, insisting that the hunger strike should not be grounds for expedition.



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