

Australian government stops doctors visiting Nauru detention camp

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In a new display of colonial-style bullying, the Australian government last week pressured Nauru's government to repudiate an agreement to allow an independent medical team to visit asylum seekers held for more than two years in the Australian-financed detention camp on the remote Pacific island.

The Nauruan authorities had invited six Australian doctors to check on the refugees' health and medical facilities as part of a deal to convince 33 mainly Afghan asylum seekers to end a desperate 29-day fast against their indefinite incarceration. Determined to maintain the Howard government's utterly intransigent stance, Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone moved to scuttle the agreement, even if it meant the resumption of the hunger strike.

She had already made clear that she would make no compromises with the detainees, even after the Nauru hospital had warned of possible deaths. On January 8, the hunger strikers suspended their protest following the Nauruan government's announcement that the doctors would visit, and after indications that the International Organisation for Migration, which administers the detention camp under contract to Australia, would review some of their cases in the light of the dangerous conditions in Afghanistan.

After hearing the announcement, the Australian government immediately took steps to ensure that no independent inspection of the camps went ahead. First, it refused to pay the doctors' fares. Then Vanstone sent a team of health, foreign affairs and immigration officials to negotiate with Nauru's government about funding additional medical services on the island. She rejected a request by the doctors for seats on the same plane.

Undeterred, the six doctors said they were ready to raise the funds to cover their costs for the trip. But the Nauruan government suddenly withdrew its offer, following talks between the two governments, in which Australia offered

aid to Nauru's sole hospital.

One of the Australian doctors, Dr Rohan Vora, said Nauru's Director of Medical Services Kieren Keke had withdrawn the offer without giving reasons. The Australian doctors could no longer contact him. Vora told ABC Radio's *AM* program that he believed the Australian government was behind the blocking of the visit.

"The Australian Government, who obviously are the major funders of it [Nauru] through their foreign aid program, [would place Keke] in a situation that he is going to have a lot of pressure put on him to keep everything very closed, rather than have a transparent and independently reviewable medical service."

Nauru's Finance Minister Kinza Clodumar hinted at the behind-the-scenes pressure applied. "It would sadden me if Australia's offer of assistance was contingent upon preventing the finest of specialist doctors with medical and humanitarian aims to make an independent assessment of the asylum seekers," he said.

Questioned by journalists, Vanstone insisted that she had not asked Nauru to withdraw the doctors' visas, but denounced the doctors, claiming that they were politically motivated and could not be termed independent. In order to cover their tracks, both governments have refused to release notes or details of their discussions. And the two-year-old memorandum of understanding between the two countries, whereby Australia agreed to finance the detention of asylum seekers on the island remains secret.

What is undeniable is that Nauru has faithfully implemented Canberra's directions since the Australian navy dumped the first asylum seekers there in September 2001. Nauru has consistently refused visas to all non-government doctors, lawyers, journalists and human rights advocates, in complete violation of the detainees' basic democratic and legal rights.

Fifty of the detainees have now signed forms requesting an independent medical assessment of their health. By the

end of the hunger strike, many men could not stand, move or digest solids. Others continued to urinate blood. During the strike, many participants were repeatedly stretchered to the hospital to be revived. Medical staff recorded 120 separate admissions by hunger strikers.

Canberra's offer of aid to the hospital disproves its claims that the hunger strikers and other asylum seekers were getting adequate care on Nauru. The aid includes elementary items such as refrigerators for blood storage, handsets to communicate within the hospital, extra staff and extra emergency beds.

Poor facilities on the island have left one 19-year-old Afghan boy blind in one eye. Louise Newman, a psychiatrist and member of the medical team blocked from visiting Nauru, said the boy had been complaining of eye pain and loss of sight for two months, yet he had no access to an eye specialist.

"He is taking an inappropriate drug, banned in Australia, that can cause severe visual problems, even blindness," she told the *Age*. She called on the Howard government to immediately send the boy to Australia to see an ophthalmologist. "The 19-year-old is in need of emergency assessment and treatment and any delay puts his remaining vision at risk."

Another group of asylum seekers blocked from seeking protection in Australia has staged a hunger strike and spoken out against their shocking treatment at the hands of the Australian navy. The Afghan refugees have been stranded on the Indonesian island of Lombok since warships forcibly escorted their boat into Indonesian waters in October 2001.

Of the 240 asylum seekers on the tiny boat, 67 remain in a holding facility on Lombok. They fear travelling to Afghanistan, despite the poor conditions in their Indonesian camp. The UN has settled only 40 of the original boatload, some have returned to Afghanistan and some have sought refuge elsewhere.

Of the 16 Afghans on the hunger strike, four sewed their lips. In statements to *Nauru Wire* the refugees explained that their action, which began on January 8, was a last resort. "In the last two years we have sought all possible ways of solution for our stateless condition but none of them worked. After all these struggles, only one way is left, the last one and the most pathetic one... [I]f we are not heard and humanitarian organisations do not pay attention to our request then we will simply die."

During the seven-day fast many of the Afghans were hospitalised and placed on drips. They ended their strike when a UN High Commissioner for Refugees official

promised to review their cases by March 1.

After their action began, the Lombok asylum seekers provided graphic details of their treatment in 2001. They recalled that their tiny boat was massively overcrowded. "We reached Ashmore Reef of Australia. Australian navy forces kept us there beside Ashmore Reef for seven days under hot sunshine... After seven days they separated the families from singles and took the families to their own navy ship and pushed all 160 singles down inside the boat where the capacity was just enough for 40 persons."

For two days, military personnel, described by the asylum seekers as "commandos," forced the male refugees to remain below deck, where they were piled on top of each other and ventilation was poor. Once they reached Indonesian waters, the sailors forced the women and children back on the boat. The "commandos" used electric sticks and beat men, women and children who objected to being sent back to Indonesia.

The asylum seekers said some of the sailors were so distressed at having to carry out their orders that they wept. Eventually, the military left the asylum seekers on a boat without fuel and with a broken engine. Indonesian fisherman eventually rescued them.

As the asylum seekers commented, the Howard government brutalised them in order to deter other refugees. "Australia does not accept us as refugee because they want to give us exemplary punishment till [in order that] the whole world refugees must not rush to Australia."

More than two years on, the Howard government is continuing to flagrantly breach the international Refugee Convention, which obliges governments to protect those fleeing political, religious, social or ethnically-based persecution.



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