

Refugees barred from Australia on hunger strike in Indonesia

Mike Head

16 August 2004

For the third time in 12 months, Afghan refugees stranded in Indonesia since Australian warships turned their boats back began a hunger strike last week, appealing for the right to asylum. Some 40 men, women and children are involved in the fast in Bogor, south of Jakarta, with at least 18 adults sewing their lips together. By last Friday, the fourth day, 12 hunger strikers had been admitted to hospital, with one leaving to resume the fast.

They launched their protest after the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) rejected another 16 applications for refugee status. From 54 cases considered this year, only three have been accepted. This is despite two previous hunger strikes—one on Lombok Island in January and another on neighbouring Sumbawa Island last year—which forced the UNHCR to promise to review their situation.

Altogether, more than 100 asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran have been living in atrocious conditions in Indonesia for more than two years since being intercepted or towed back into Indonesian waters by the Australian navy. In some cases, they successfully landed on Australian soil, such as Ashmore Reef, but were forcibly removed.

The hunger strikers are members of the Hazara minority who originally fled from the persecution of the Taliban regime and now fear repression under the current US-installed authorities in Afghanistan. Economic and social conditions have also deteriorated in the war-torn country, amid armed resistance to interim president Karzai's puppet administration.

"We will continue our hunger strike until a fair solution is found to our problems," Ghulam, a 21-year-old student who is the group's spokesman, told one news agency. "The United Nations told us, we know your country is still at war, and promised us to bring us to a third country. But then they rejected us."

Officials from the UNHCR and the International

Organisation for Migration (IOM), which were placed in charge of the refugees under agreements with the Australian government, have refused to relent. They claim to have gone to "extraordinary lengths" to review their applications in the light of changing circumstances in Afghanistan. Speaking from Jakarta, UNHCR spokesman, Stephane Jaquemet said: "We will not reconsider their cases because they are on hunger strike. It is extremely sad that they resort to this kind of pressure because they are putting their own life and possibly the lives of their family at risk."

Even where the UNHCR has granted asylum seekers' claims, the Howard government has denied them entry to Australia, despite the fact that many are the wives and children of men currently living in Australia as recognised refugees. According to Australian Hazara Ethnic Society president Hassan Ghulam, who conducted extensive interviews in various Indonesian refugee-holding facilities following the January hunger strike, at least 58 women and children are in this predicament.

By pushing these families back to Indonesia, one of the poorest and most heavily-populated countries in the world, Canberra has flagrantly violated the 1951 Refugee Convention, which obliges all signatories to protect those fleeing political, religious and ethnic persecution, not to discriminate against those arriving on unauthorised boats and not to repel refugees to face persecution elsewhere. Indonesia, which is not a signatory to the Convention, could now place the Hazaras in immigration detention centres or deport them back to Afghanistan.

In a report published in April, Hassan Ghulam condemned the conditions in which the IOM is housing the refugees in cheap hotels, under contract to the Australian government. "Basic accommodation, basic food twice a day, one toy per child per year... Family members are separated, children are denied education. Adults denied their human rights and stripped of their

human dignity are falling apart. They are strangers in a strange land which will not allow them to live with full rights as human beings.” Refugees spoke of deaths and suicides, fear of disease, vulnerability and despair.

Regardless of their plight, and irrespective of the conditions in Afghanistan, Prime Minister John Howard’s government remains determined to block their entry to Australia, in order to deter other refugees and maintain its reactionary closed-door policy. In the wake of the Tampa affair of August-September 2001, it demonised asylum seekers and took far-reaching measures—setting up a naval cordon, “excising” off-shore islands from Australia’s migration zone, and transporting refugees to remote Pacific islands—to deny them their basic democratic and legal rights.

Its decisions—and those taken on its behalf by the UNHCR—are based on the most crass political calculations. This can be seen from the fact that while it has intransigently barred entry to the Afghans in Indonesia, it has recently granted visas to most of their fellow Hazaras who were detained in an Australian-financed detention camp on the tiny Pacific island of Nauru.

In announcing the government’s about-face on the Nauru detainees—after it had imprisoned them for almost three years—Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone claimed to be acting on new information from the UNHCR about unsafe conditions in Afghanistan. She cynically painted the decision as an example of the government’s supposed benevolence. The detainees (many of whom were from the Tampa) would “fill a place under Australia’s generous Refugee and Humanitarian Program, on which the government will spend \$2 billion over the next four years”.

In reality, several political considerations were involved. It had become harder to keep insisting that the installation of puppet regime in Afghanistan had created peace and democracy. Moreover, the Nauru detention camps were being challenged in the Supreme Court of Nauru for breaching the island’s constitution, which prohibits imprisonment without trial or legal representation. Above all, despite every effort by the government to prevent any media or public contact with the Nauru detainees, they had won considerable support among ordinary Australians, making it difficult for the government to keep scapegoating them.

However, the refugees scattered across Indonesia have been more hidden from view, allowing Vanstone and her colleagues to continue to use them as pawns in their anti-

refugee policy. Among the Indonesian asylum seekers are also survivors of boats that either sank or nearly sank trying to reach Australia, including the SIEV X, which went down in Australian-patrolled waters in October 2001, drowning more than 350 people, including 150 children.

The Howard government has a definite interest in preventing eyewitnesses of the SIEV X and other refugee boat tragedies from relating their stories to Australian audiences. There is considerable evidence that the government permitted the SIEV X to sink, or was even involved in sabotaging the over-crowded boat, so that the deaths of so many people would frighten off other refugees.

Based on his interviews in Indonesia with survivors of a number of boats, Hassan Ghulam estimated that between 600 and 1,000 asylum seekers had drowned in the waters between Indonesia and Australia, sometimes as the result of boats being sabotaged by police or undercover agents acting in concert with the “people smugglers” who organised the voyages. One refugee told Ghulam: “Holes were drilled in the boat and stuffed with a piece of wood. As the pressure of the load of the boat increased, this wooden plug popped out and the ship took on water.”

Another survivor said: “Our boat was taking water and the Australian authority pushed us back to the Indonesian waters. During the journey, the pump provided by the Australians was pumping water out from inside. Then they took the pump away and showed us which direction to go. As the boat sank, our feet could touch the ground. If this had happened a few metres further away, we would have been dead.”

Ghulam’s April report described the “current hopelessness and destitution” of the refugees stuck in Indonesia as “a human tragedy”. Their resort to another hunger strike four months later highlights this ongoing tragedy and the Australian government’s direct responsibility for it.



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