

Elderly woman becomes another victim of Australian immigration policy

Marco Trevisiol, Will Marshall
1 October 2005

The death of 79-year-old Syrian woman Aziza Agha is another tragedy produced by the Australian government's inhumane immigration policies.

Aziza arrived in Melbourne from Lebanon in September 2004 to visit her children and grandchildren and was granted a six-month visitor's visa. Her health deteriorated, however, and she became increasingly frail. She was suffering from diabetes, arthritis and iron deficiency and was unsteady on her feet.

After her visa ran out, Aziza's family sought a six-month extension as she was not fit to return to Lebanon. But the Immigration Department refused the request and would only renew the visa on a monthly basis, eventually insisting that she travel to its offices for a medical examination.

Her own doctor, Chris Towie, became increasingly concerned about Aziza's health. He sent letters to the Immigration Department warning that she was unfit to travel from the outer suburb of Broadmeadows to the city centre. He requested that she be examined in her own home.

The Immigration Department ignored Towie's advice and Aziza was forced on August 8 to make the trip to the city. She died two days later.

Aziza's case may never have come to light had it not been for Towie's efforts to publicise the issue. He was so convinced that her treatment had been a contributing factor to her death that he included "harassment by the Immigration Department" on her death certificate.

Towie commented that the mistreatment of Aziza was "so serious ... that it may be a criminal act to have required her to attend in such a manner". He referred the matter to the Victorian Coroner. On August 31, an additional investigation by the Commonwealth Ombudsman was announced.

The Immigration Department has refused to accept any responsibility for Aziza's death. A statement issued by the Department affirmed that its doctor "had declared she was fit to travel [back to Lebanon] subject to provision of a non-medical escort (probably family), wheelchair access to the aircraft and possibly supplemental oxygen during the flight".

Given Aziza's medical condition, the decision to compel her to fly home to Lebanon amounted to a virtual death sentence. She died before it could be carried out. Towie attempted to contact the Health Services Australia doctor responsible for Aziza's examination to ask why there was such a huge discrepancy between their assessments, but was given the run around.

The tragic death of Aziza is not an isolated incident. The Immigration Department's callous indifference to her ill health is simply a reflection of the longstanding policy of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments to enforce stringent immigration restrictions using the most draconian methods.

The Howard government has locked up hundreds of refugees, including women and children, indefinitely under the mandatory detention, without any legal rights. Police and immigration officials routinely raid workplaces and homes to seize and deport so-called illegal immigrants.

The government has proven utterly insensitive to the plight of refugees and immigrants, dismissing protests inside detention centres and growing opposition outside to the inhumane regime. It was compelled to make minor modifications to its policy after it came to light that an Australian permanent resident, Cornelia Rau, who was suffering from a psychological illness, was locked up for months as an "unlawful non-citizen". Other cases have since come to light, including that of Vivian Alvarez, a seriously ill Australian citizen who was deported to the Philippines.

The Liberal-National government, like previous Labor governments, has sought to make scapegoats out of asylum seekers and "illegal" immigrants. By blaming them for the lack of jobs, housing and social services, Howard has sought to stir up fears and anxieties and deflect attention from the devastating impact of his government's policies on living standards.

Aziza was not a refugee or illegally in Australia. Yet such is the regime that has been put in place that all visitors, particularly from the Middle East or Asia, are regarded as potential visa-overstayers and treated accordingly. Given the

record of the Immigration Department, it is not surprising that its officials ignored Aziza's doctor advice and declared her fit to fly home. After Aziza's death, her family received official notification that she had two weeks to leave the country.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Dr Chris Towie about Aziza's death.

WSWS: Can you outline Aziza Agha's condition before her death?

CT: After a few months of her arrival I told the family not to bring her here anymore as it would be frightening just to travel here. I visited her several times and I would also see her incidentally when I saw other members of the family. Two things have to be kept in mind as far as her death is concerned. There was the concern about her medical condition but inevitably, social circumstances impact on any medical condition. Her temporary visa was expiring. The family was concerned and I couldn't imagine her travelling. Elderly people become emotionally dependent upon those around them when they are sick. You could see that Aziza was scared. She was nervous. She clutched my hand at one of my last visits and said, "I don't think I can cope". She looked distracted. She even called me Habibe, which is like a plea to an authority for assistance. She also begged, "Please don't let them do this to me". I had written several times to stop her being moved. On each occasion, the Immigration Department had contacted me and I had discussed her condition. The last certificate was to stop the Department from forcing her to be examined in late July. On that certificate I wrote, "The patient is unfit to attend your offices due to frailty aggravated by a respiratory infection all this week. Ideally she could be seen at home".

And it surprised me that they didn't ring me. I assumed they'd just accepted the certificate on its face value, and that they were not going to continue with the attempt at deporting her.

The Immigration Department initially denied that I had explicitly stated that Aziza could not travel. That just wasn't true. I had tested her condition and I saw that it took two people to assist her simply to walk across the room. WSWS: What was the response of the Immigration Department to your certificates?

CT: Without contacting me at all, the Immigration Department informed the family that she was required to be in their offices. But I had expressly said that she couldn't be moved.

The family was distressed when they were informed that the Department was still insisting on seeing her. They felt hounded. They were scared that she might be hauled off to a detention centre or deported if they didn't comply. Many people from Middle Eastern origins have a real fear of that.

They have come from places where that same political climate of gross violations of human rights has predominated.

The Department later said that I had claimed she would need oxygen and a wheelchair. That is not the case either. I said nothing of the sort. I simply said that she was unfit to attend. They definitely understood.

Someone has blood on their hands and should be held accountable. As Australians, we have to stand up and not tolerate this. Medical advice has been ignored. There was definitely no need for the haste in the actions of the Immigration Department. She was absolutely no risk and she wasn't going anywhere. Her family was straightforward and co-operative to a fault.

WSWS: Do you see any connection between how Aziza Agha was treated and the other recent cases such as Cornelia Rau who was falsely detained by the Immigration Department?

CT: I have seen some terrible things happen to people. But I think this is one of the most callous things to happen. The political climate in Australia has become punitive and repressive, targeting minorities such as migrants, refugees, Aboriginals, the disabled, the elderly, gays and lesbians. These groups are easy targets because they don't have the political muscle or the money. Many of these people are victims in their own right and they simply don't have the time to answer governments who have millions of dollars.

I have actually dealt with many people who have been in detention centres. You would think that they were from Third World prisons. The use of solitary confinement as a punishment is simply torture. What can you say?

I worked in the Philippines prior to the ousting of Marcos. The guards at those prisons were more sympathetic than the guards here. The people I treated have adjustment disorders that last for years after they are released. They are severely traumatised, as if they had come from a Nazi camp.

These are concentration camps in Australia. Prisoners are there only because of some visa infringement and they are punished violently for years. Australia has its own Abu Graibs. It is important that the medical profession advocates for the poorer of society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact