

Australia: Detained refugee dies in Perth hospital

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An asylum seeker held at the Curtin detention centre in the remote north-west of Western Australia (WA) died on August 22 at Perth's Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital. The death was confirmed the following day by immigration department officials, who provided sketchy details of the circumstances.

The 30-year-old male, whose name has not been released, is reportedly Afghan. He was found unconscious by staff on the afternoon of August 21 at the former air force base. Following attempts at resuscitation, he was sent by ambulance to Derby Regional Hospital and then flown overnight to Perth, where he later died. The man's family has been informed. His death has been referred to the WA Coroner and a police report is being prepared.

An immigration department statement declared: "At this stage, there are not believed to be any suspicious circumstances surrounding the man's death." Unnamed sources told the *Australian* that the man had died of a heart attack, possibly as a result of a congenital condition, and ruled out suicide or altercations with detention centre staff as possible causes.

According to the *Australian*, immigration officials have refused to say if the man had been diagnosed with any pre-existing conditions, or if he had access to proper medical care. The death, however, raises obvious questions about the standard of care provided to detainees. It is unusual for 30-year-olds to suddenly die of a heart attack. If he had been diagnosed with a significant heart problem, what medical care had been provided? If an underlying condition had not been identified, what medical checks are conducted on refugees?

The Curtin detention centre, like others in Australia, are effectively run as prisons, with limited outside access to detainees permitted. Curtin was deliberately sited in one of the most isolated areas of Australia, thousands of kilometres from any major city. Political responsibility for the man's death rests squarely with the Labor government, which has maintained the incarceration of refugees in breach of international law.

Medical facilities were clearly inadequate for dealing with the emergency. Interviewed on a "7.30 Report" program in 2000, former refugee Al Muderis pointed out that from 1999 to 2000 there was no doctor and only one nurse available for 1,200 people, with the nurse unqualified to treat acute cases. The detention centre was closed in 2002, only to be reopened last June, initially to house refugees from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. It is unlikely that the number of qualified medical staff has increased substantially from what Muderis described in 2000.

The hospital in the nearby town of Derby, which is more than 2,300 kilometres north of the state capital of Perth, also has limited facilities. The Rural Clinical School of WA states that Derby Regional Hospital provides "medical, surgical, paediatric and maternity care" and has a "busy emergency service". But refugee advocates have argued that it is impossible for detainees to be provided with suitable access to medical as well as legal and counselling services in such a remote location. Specialists (including a cardiologist) visit Derby and other Kimberley communities several times a year and are therefore not available for emergency cases.

The Keating Labor government introduced mandatory detention in 1992, branding asylum seekers as “illegal immigrants”. The policy was subsequently extended under the Howard government, which during the 2001 federal election campaign seized on the arrival of refugees aboard the Tampa to whip up a xenophobic campaign, joined by the Labor Party, advocating tougher “border protection”.

The Curtin detention centre was notorious for self-injury, suicide attempts and protests produced by isolation and the uncertainty caused by prolonged indefinite detention. Described as a “psychiatric catastrophe” by Zachary Steel, a clinical psychologist and senior lecturer at the University of NSW, it was a privately-run centre and had no mental health services.

An article published in the *Age* in April after the Labor government announced the reopening highlighted the conditions. Former detainee Farshid Kheiroollahpoor commented that asylum seekers felt it was “hidden away, away from civilisation and out of mind”. Another Afghan former detainee stated: “There was no proper medical service and people couldn’t visit us because it was in the middle of the desert”.

Amid growing public opposition and protests at the detention centre, the Howard government shut the Curtin camp in 2002. During the 2007 election campaign, the Labor Party postured as opponents of Howard’s refugee policy, but on winning office retained its essential features, including the compulsory detention of so-called boat people. The Labor government reopened the Curtin centre in June in response to gross overcrowding at the offshore processing centre on remote Christmas Island.

The increased number of detainees was in part due to the Labor government’s freeze on processing Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers, for six months and three months respectively. There are plans to treble the capacity of the Curtin centre, which currently holds 560 males. The refugees largely consist of Tamils fleeing the oppression of the Sri Lankan government and Afghans escaping the neo-colonial war being waged in their country, led by the US and supported by Australia. With military operations intensifying in Afghanistan,

there will undoubtedly be more people fleeing the conflict.

The reopening of the Curtin detention centre highlights the punitive character of the government’s refugee policy. In the campaign for this month’s federal election, the major parties sought to outbid each other in maintaining and strengthening the present “border protection” regime that has resulted in the indefinite detention of thousands of refugees whose only “crime” is to seek a decent life for themselves. The tragic death of an asylum seeker from the Curtin centre is a consequence of this reactionary policy.



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