

Mass breakout at Australian refugee detention centre

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More than 90 Afghan asylum seekers broke out of an Australian government detention centre in the northern city of Darwin early this morning and conducted a peaceful protest beside a busy highway during the morning peak period. The men unveiled eight banners made out of sheets, carrying slogans such as “We need protection not detention” and “Please help us, show mercy to us”.

A spokesman for the refugees, Hussein Ali, said they feared being sent back to Afghanistan. After being held in Darwin for four months, they were told by immigration officials that Afghanistan was safe enough for them to return. Ali said they would be killed if they went back to Afghanistan or neighbouring Pakistan, where numbers of ethnic Hazara people have been living.

Members of the group said refugees who had been forcibly returned to Afghanistan from detention on the Pacific island of Nauru under the former Howard government had been “slaughtered” and the same would happen to them.

Some of the men appeared to want to pass notes to the media, but their request was refused. One man told a reporter he feared he would be killed if he returned to Afghanistan. “If Afghanistan is safe what are the Australian soldiers doing there?” he asked. “What are the Americans doing there?”

Considerable efforts are being made by the government and immigration authorities to prevent the detainees from making their plight known to the public. The Immigration Department has released only scant information about the protests, and police have kept media representatives away from the area.

The mass breakout followed three days of protests at the centre by alleged Indonesian “people smugglers”—in reality, young impoverished fishermen who crewed refugee boats to Australia. On Sunday, about 100 Indonesian detainees rioted, setting mattresses on fire and

brandishing poles on a rooftop. They continued rooftop and ground protests on Monday, demanding to be sent home after being detained for more than nine months without charge.

Both events highlight the barbaric character of the Gillard Labor government’s mandatory detention regime, which imprisons refugees and their boat crews, without trial, in violation of elementary legal and democratic rights. Australia’s detention facilities have become holding pens for thousands of refugees, effectively in indefinite detention, worsened by a government freeze since April on processing Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers, for six months and three months respectively. More than a thousand Afghans and Sri Lankans are now incarcerated as a direct result of the freeze.

About 4,100 people in total are currently being detained, more than at the height of the Howard government’s “Pacific Solution,” when asylum seekers were transported to Nauru. Labor took office in 2007 pledging to modify the detention regime, but instead has maintained all its essential features.

Both the refugees—who are fleeing the US-led war in Afghanistan—and the crew members who have steered their boats, are being held in appalling conditions in increasingly cramped facilities. The detention centre at Darwin’s Coonawarra Naval Base currently houses nearly 500 detainees, including 179 Indonesian crew members.

Together with other re-opened detention centres, including at the remote Curtin air force base in Australia’s far north-west, the naval base has become an overflow facility for the offshore processing centre on Christmas Island, a tiny Australian territory in the Indian Ocean. Some 2,516 people are currently detained on Christmas Island, including another 33 Indonesian crew members, taking the total crew being held in custody to 212.

The Immigration Department said last weekend's protest began when two men climbed a tree and refused to come down, and escalated to involve the majority of the Indonesian crew members being detained in the centre. At one point, some of the rioters handed over a letter asking to be returned to Indonesia, with a promise not to return to Australia.

As the standoff unfolded, a large fire was lit outside and about a dozen men climbed onto the roof and were seen bashing it with long poles. The Australian Federal Police are now investigating charges of assault, affray and property damage. Under legislation introduced by Howard and maintained by the Labor government, the detainees already face people-smuggling offences that carry mandatory jail terms of up to 20 years.

The protests underscore the political fraud of the government's attack on the fishermen as "people smugglers". Almost all of them are young men, some teenagers. They come from Indonesian villages where poverty has been exacerbated since the Australian government excluded local fishermen from extensive traditional fishing grounds, after the Australian government declared them to be within its 200-nautical mile offshore "exclusive economic zone". The same naval patrols that intercept refugee vessels also seize and impound fishing boats.

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre spokeswoman Pamela Curr told journalists that frustration is growing because of the lengthy delays the fishermen are being forced to suffer before charges are laid. "Why are they sitting there waiting for months? The people smugglers, most of them are either teenagers or young Indonesian fishermen who have, for as little as \$50, brought people over."

Curr added that it is extremely difficult to know exactly what is happening at the detention centre because of tight restrictions on communication imposed by the Department of Immigration and the contractor that operates the facility, Serco Australia.

Indonesia's Acting Consul in Darwin, Bambang Daranindra, said many of the men were desperate after waiting up to nine months for police investigations to finish. He told the media: "They told me, some of them, 'It's better for me to be shot, or it's better for me to die instead of prolonging stay in detention'."

For Indonesian crew, life in the Northern Immigration Detention Centre in Darwin is worse than on Christmas Island, where some were given day releases for sporting and recreational activities. Crew members who were airlifted to Darwin earlier this year have had their mobile

phones confiscated, cutting them off from communicating with their families and the outside world.

Throughout the campaign for the August 21 federal election, Prime Minister Julia Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott vied to produce the harshest regime to punish asylum seekers and prevent them from exercising their fundamental right, under the international Refugee Convention, to flee persecution.

The arrival of several thousand refugees was elevated to the political centre stage, as a cynical means of diverting escalating discontent over mass unemployment and under-employment, worsening working conditions and chronically-underfunded social infrastructure such as public transport, hospitals and schools.

Gillard vowed to step up naval patrols to intercept boats and establish an offshore processing centre in another country, possibly East Timor, while the Liberals made "stopping the boats" one of their principal slogans.

The Greens, whose nine senators are set to hold the balance of power in the upper house, made limited criticisms of the detention regime, but defended the basic framework of detention and visa processing. In response to the Darwin protests, Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young blamed the situation on police "under-resourcing," saying that this had delayed people-smuggling prosecutions.

Only the Socialist Equality Party fought throughout the election campaign for the abolition of the entire detention regime and for the recognition of the basic democratic right of all people, whatever their country of origin or ethnic background, to live and work in the country of their choice, with full civil and political rights.



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