

Australia: Gillard government responsible for suicide at immigration detention centre

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Josefa Rauluni, a 36-year-old Fijian man, died on Monday morning after throwing himself off the roof of the Villawood detention centre in Sydney's western suburbs. Rauluni had been in detention for a little over a month and was due to be deported that morning. After climbing onto the roof, witnesses say he pleaded to be allowed to stay in Australia because he feared persecution if he returned to Fiji.

The suicide comes less than a week after Professor Louise Newman, the Chair of the Mental Health subgroup of the government's Detention Health Advisory Group, warned that the detention system was on the verge of tipping into a mental health crisis. Interviewed on the ABC's "Lateline" program, she said: "We're starting to see a repetition of some of the factors that produced the terrible rate of mental health problems we saw previously. We're certainly seeing increasing numbers of people presenting with distress, be that depression, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depending on where they've come from."

Refugee support groups say that three Tamil asylum seekers at Villawood have attempted suicide in recent weeks, and there have been several serious suicide attempts at Christmas Island.

Josefa Rauluni, who leaves behind a wife and six-year-old son in Fiji, wrote to immigration authorities on Sunday, warning he would commit suicide if forced to return: "I cannot describe my utter disappointment with your decision," he wrote, concluding, "If you want to send me to Fiji, then send my dead body."

Rauluni's suicide provoked an immediate protest by fellow-detainees. Five Tamil refugees climbed onto the roof of the detention centre, declaring a 24-hour fast in sympathy with the dead man: They have since been joined by another four Sri Lankans, one Afghan and an Iraqi. The men have threatened to jump from the roof at

5 pm today if their claims for asylum are not reviewed, by either the UNHCR or the Department of Immigration.

A group of 16 Iranian and Kurdish asylum seekers is on hunger strike at the same facility. The Iranians were transferred to Villawood from Christmas Island about four months ago, after their initial asylum claims were rejected.

The new minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard bears direct responsibility for the suicide and the rapidly deteriorating conditions throughout Australia's detention centres. Its response to recent protests has been to beef up the mandatory detention regime. Late last week Immigration Minister Chris Bowen announced the expansion of several of Australia's detention centres and the opening of another "temporary" detention facility in Far North Queensland.

People fleeing persecution and war in their own countries will be housed in the most inhumane manner, crammed into cubicles, in a military environment, and in some of the harshest and most remote parts of Australia.

Scherger Air Force base, 30 km south of Weipa in far north Queensland will be "adapted" to take 300 single adult men. Weipa is in Australia's cyclone band, where maximum temperatures reach 35 degrees Centigrade. The whole area is completely inaccessible by road during the wet season, which lasts from December to March, when two metres of rain typically falls.

The capacity of the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre will be doubled--up to 1,200. Curtin, another previous unmanned air force base, is located in one of the most inaccessible and inhospitable locations in Western Australia, more than 2,000 kilometres from the state capital, Perth. It also suffers from extreme weather

conditions, with summer temperatures reaching 42 degrees C. Like Weipa, the area is subject to cyclones, very high humidity and torrential rain. It currently has the capacity to hold 560 detainees, but was housing 753 men as of September 17.

On September 2, 90 Afghan asylum seekers broke out of the Northern Immigration Detention Centre in Darwin, staged a peaceful protest, pleading with authorities to re-examine their failed bids for refugee status. Some had been in detention for 10 months. They have since been transferred to the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre in what many regard as punishment.

Last week, Bowen made clear that the regime of mandatory detention would be maintained and expanded: "Detention is an important and vital part of our immigration system and it will remain so".

One of the centres to be expanded is the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation for unaccompanied children and families with children. Its current capacity is 51, but it will soon hold an extra 100.

It is more than two years since the former Rudd Labor government promised to end the detention of children. There are currently 645 children in immigration detention, in what are euphemistically called "alternate places of detention".

According to Professor Louise Newman, such detention is harmful. "If children are in accommodation where they're not free to leave and where they're under guard, then that is children in detention." Newman also pointed to cases of children incarcerated on Christmas Island, who had been held in some of the worst and most dilapidated accommodation on the island.

Pamela Curr from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre reported that in Darwin's "alternate place" of detention, the Darwin Airport Lodge, there were 150 teenage boys who had not been outside the facility since April this year. She said that she expected the situation would worsen.

The new Greens-backed Labor government is pursuing the punitive policy of indefinite detention in complete defiance of widespread public sentiment. A major factor in the downfall of the Howard government in the 2007 election was mass opposition towards the mandatory detention regime. Labor promised to adopt a more humane refugee policy, but instead has expanded

the system against asylum-seekers.

At June 30 last year, there were 1,036 people in immigration detention, with boat arrivals representing 75.5 percent of detainees. By September this year, the number had risen to 4,902. This means that there are now more asylum-seekers incarcerated than during the Howard years, when numbers in detention peaked at just under 4,000 in 1999 and 2002.

The Greens effectively support Labor's repressive measures. After visiting the Darwin detention centre last week, Greens' Senator Sarah Hanson-Young criticised the inhumane character of the Labor government's mandatory regime and called for modifications to speed up processes and place children in appropriate accommodation. But the Greens, on whom Labor's majority in the lower house rests, are in a formal alliance with Labor and thus directly responsible for its policies. Making evident that her party had no intention of seriously challenging Labor's policy, Hanson-Young declared that she had written to the immigration minister asking for a meeting and expressed the hope that "all sides [can] work together to find a solution".

The right of asylum-seekers to live and work in the country of their choice, with full citizenship rights, is opposed by the Greens. Hansen-Young made clear their underlying support for the policy of "border control" when she declared that any person found not to be a "genuine" refugee should be deported as quickly as possible. Along with Labor, the Greens bear direct political responsibility for the death of Josefa Rauluni and the appalling conditions—physical, emotional and psychological-- confronting every other incarcerated asylum-seeker.



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