

Australia: Local residents offer support to asylum seekers

Our reporters
23 September 2010

Throughout Tuesday up to 100 local residents from neighbouring suburbs spontaneously gathered outside the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre on Tuesday as 11 asylum seekers protested on a detention block roof. The high-security, barbed-wire enclosed facility, which currently holds over 500 refugees, is located in Sydney's working-class western suburbs.

The roof-top protest, involving asylum seekers from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq, began on Monday after Josefa Rauluni, a 36-year-old Fijian man, committed suicide by jumping from the roof of the facility. Rauluni, who had been in detention for over a month, was due to be deported that day. He had previously told immigration and government officials that he would commit suicide as he feared persecution if returned to Fiji.

The Afghan, Iraqi and Sri Lankan men also threatened to jump from the roof at 5 pm on Tuesday unless their asylum claims were reviewed by the UN refugee agency or the Department of Immigration.

In January 2008, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) described the high-security section of Villawood Detention Centre as the "most prison like" of all Australia's immigration detention centres, and demanded it be closed immediately. HREOC described conditions inside the detention centre as "harsh and inhospitable".

Not everyone gathered outside the centre supported the asylum seekers. Encouraged by the relentless anti-refugee campaign of the media, the government and opposition, several people were actively hostile. Not surprisingly, the local media chose to highlight their remarks.

However, the overwhelming majority of those outside the detention centre had come spontaneously to give moral support to the protestors. They included local

workers and their families, high school students and small-business people who were critical of the Australian government's callous treatment of the asylum seekers.

Halime Abdul-Rahman, who has a small florist shop in an adjoining suburb, brought her three daughters and two young nieces to the gathering.

"I want to teach my children about freedom and respect for all peoples' rights," she said. "I want my kids to know that asylum seekers should be treated fairly and not locked up in cages like this. I wanted to send the protestors some red roses from my florist to support them but then I realised the authorities would only confiscate them."

Mariam, her niece, said: "I think these people should be able to live and work where they want. These people should be made free and I'm very surprised Labor is locking up all these people for no reason. What about human rights?"

Halime said: "I don't agree with the way these people are being treated. They should be released immediately so they can work and help to build up our communities. It's such a waste and is very sad. There are people in there with real skills who would be assets to the country.

"What makes somebody take action like this—to go on hunger strike or protest on the roof here? It's because conditions in there are horrible. People who have come here in boats are obviously desperate. Why would anyone risk their lives to do this? They have come from one tragedy and now find themselves in another," she said.

"The Afghan people are here because the Americans and the Australians have invaded their countries. We don't have any right to be in Afghanistan and all that's been created is a mess. We are the cause of this. Few

people leave their country of birth unless it's for a good reason or the life they face is terrible.

"It doesn't matter who's in power—Liberal or Labor—there's no difference in the way they treat these people. Locking up people like this should not be allowed under any government. I can't find the words to sum up how sad I feel about this and I get very angry about the way the talkback radio and the newspapers stir up people against refugees. They're responsible for all this racism," she said.

Nancy, originally from Lebanon, came with her daughter to the protest. "These people probably suffered for years now and I think they should be just given a chance to start a new life here in Australia. They're being locked up for nothing," she told WSWs reporters.

Nina, from Wollongong about 100 kilometres south of Sydney, heard about the protest via a text message and decided to come and lend her support.

"I've been horrified [about detention centres] for a long time. I think asylum seekers should be protected and sheltered. The conditions in the detention facilities must be terrible. People are going mad and they're not being acknowledged; that's the worst thing. Families are in there for years on end. It's prison," she said.

Julie, originally from Lebanon, told the WSWs: "Why can't these people get a fair go? They're not criminals and they didn't do anything wrong. They are human beings—just like you and me. They should be allowed to stay: it's a big country."

Ray, her son, said: "These people are seeking asylum and they're willing to die in their attempts to come here. Isn't it supposed to be a human right to have shelter?"

Dallas Kumar, a small-business owner who immigrated to Australia about ten years ago, was driving past the detention centre and decided to stop. He was visibly upset about Rauluni's death and said it had shocked all his friends and other members of the Fijian community.

"This is a real tragedy. Fiji is so close to Australia—we are neighbours—but how can the government treat neighbours like this. This guy was only 36 years old and all he had done is over-stay his visa. Why should this be a crime? I just don't understand it.

"As soon as we found about his death we all began

phoning each other and a few people came round to our place yesterday afternoon to talk about it. It's the first time we'd ever heard of a Fijian national doing this in Australia and it made us worry about what the situation is like in these places. The government should be more lenient towards these people."

"I'm not surprised this is going on under Labor," he added. "They don't care about ordinary people and although I'm a Liberal voter—I have a small business—I have to admit that they all have the same policies."

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