

Australia: Gillard Labor responsible for another refugee suicide

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A tragic suicide by an asylum seeker inside Sydney's Villawood Immigration Detention Centre early on Tuesday morning—the second in two months—has highlighted the inhumanity of the mandatory detention regime that is being continuously expanded by the Gillard Labor government.

This week's victim, Ahmad al-Akabi, hung himself in a toilet block. A 41-year-old Iraqi school teacher with three young daughters, he had been detained for more than a year, initially on the Indian Ocean territory of Christmas Island, after arriving in Australian waters by boat. His death came only two months after a Fijian detainee, Josefa Rauluni, 36, leapt to his death off a roof at Villawood just before he was due to be deported back to Fiji.

Both deaths fuelled anger and dismay among other detainees, leading to rooftop protests. Yesterday, five asylum seekers climbed on top of a compound, displaying a banner that called for "protection, not detention" and asked "who's next?" About 160 prisoners reportedly began a hunger strike on Tuesday morning and around 22 Iranians continued their strike into yesterday.

Al-Akabi fled Iraq after being attacked by religious militias. The Australian government, however, had twice denied him a refugee protection visa. He is understood to have suffered severe depression in recent months and demanded to be returned to the Iraqi city of Karbala, where he had worked as a primary school teacher.

A fellow Iraqi asylum seeker at Villawood, who knew al-Akabi, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "He had become very upset and depressed and he told authorities, 'If you will not give me a protection visa then please let me go home now'... He wanted to go home; he had girls aged two, four and seven. Nobody

knows why this wasn't allowed to happen."

A former Iraqi detainee, Saad Tlaa, who had also been incarcerated for more than a year, told ABC radio on his mobile phone that al-Akabi had been worn down by being in detention so long. Tlaa said he was seriously worried about the mental health of other detainees, including those who climbed on the roof. "Some [people are] upset," he said. "[People] feel down, they feel, 'what's the future of our case?' Or 'what's the future for our application'?"

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen flatly defended his government's treatment of al-Akabi. He claimed that the asylum seeker had twice asked to be removed to Iraq, but had changed his mind. "So acts had begun to remove him involuntarily," Bowen told ABC radio. "Now, that is obviously very stressful for everybody involved, particularly him, and these are always difficult cases. But it doesn't mean that we cannot implement our laws, which are that if you are not accepted as a refugee ... then we need to take steps to remove you."

Bowen also claimed that the government had put in place "a rigorous mental healthcare program". However, he and his department refused to comment on whether al-Akabi had received psychiatric treatment, citing privacy concerns. The department said Serco, the global contractor that operates Villawood and other Australian detention centres, had been made aware that the Iraqi teacher was a suicide risk.

Whether mental health procedures were instituted or not, responsibility for both suicides lies squarely with Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Greens-backed government, which has maintained and extended the punitive policy of indefinite detention in defiance of widespread public disgust. Mass opposition toward the detention regime was a key factor in the Howard

Liberal government's defeat in the 2007 election. Labor promised a more humane policy, and that people would be released from detention within 90 days of their arrival, but instead the system has been expanded.

Across the country, detention camps have been opened or reopened, including in remote, inhospitable military bases, taking the total holding capacity to close to 8,000. Already there are more than 5,000 detainees in increasingly over-crowded facilities, well above the total incarcerated in the Howard years, when numbers peaked at just under 4,000 in 1999 and 2002. More than 700 of the prisoners are unaccompanied minors—children and teenagers travelling without parents.

On September 1, 90 Afghani asylum seekers broke out of the Northern Immigration Detention Centre in Darwin and staged a peaceful protest, pleading with authorities to re-examine their failed bids for refugee status.

In another symptom of the rising tensions and distress caused by prolonged detention, up to 50 unaccompanied Afghani teenagers were involved in fights last Sunday that broke out in the dining room of the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation facility at Broadmeadows. The number of detainees at the Broadmeadows centre, originally built for 30, swelled to 136 last weekend, after 98 teenagers arrived from Christmas Island.

Several demountables have been set up for the new inmates, but refugee advocate Pamela Curr said the fight illustrated overcrowding problems, with only six computers for the youth to share. "Those rooms were designed for one, (but) they've put two double bunks in each room with a metre of space between the beds," she said.

Mental health professionals, including the government's detention health task force chairperson, Professor Louise Newman, have warned that detainees' mental health inevitably deteriorates after 12 months of incarceration, especially when they remain in limbo, not knowing when, or if, they will ever be released.

Some media outlets suggested that al-Akabi could have appealed to the courts against his deportation, following a unanimous High Court decision last week that ruled invalid some aspects of the government's "Refugee Status Assessment" system. That system bars asylum seekers from access to the courts to challenge

refusals of protection visas. Many commentators hailed the ruling as a victory for refugees, but the judges left the detention regime itself intact. Under the Migration Act, which the court upheld, Bowen retains a sweeping discretion to not even consider a refugee application, or to reject it "in the public interest".

Nevertheless, the government immediately declared its intention to find ways to overcome or circumvent the High Court's ruling. Among Gillard's proposals is to build a detention facility in East Timor, thus taking asylum seekers outside Australian legal jurisdiction. Even if detainees retain the right to go to court, the government is certain to fight them, potentially all the way to the High Court on each occasion, to defeat their visa applications. As a result, thousands of people could be detained for years, worsening the overcrowding, fuelling protests and multiplying mental health breakdowns.

Mandatory detention was introduced by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the early 1990s. The Gillard government is maintaining and expanding it, but this time relying upon the parliamentary support of the Greens, who are now functioning as enablers of Labor's entire immigration agenda, despite their limited "criticisms" of some of its most barbaric features.



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