Another suicide inside Australia's refugee detention centres

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Afghan refugee Mohammed Asif Atay, aged 19, committed suicide on Monday at the Curtin detention facility, a remote former military base in the far north of Western Australia.

The death of the young man, a member of the Hazara ethnic minority group that is persecuted in Afghanistan, is a direct result of the policies of the Gillard Labor government, which is deliberately keeping asylum seekers in prolonged detention and attempting to deport rejected Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan.

The suicide—the fifth in detention centres in the past seven months—has cast more light on the inhuman treatment of asylum seekers, which is continuing to fuel unrest throughout the increasingly over-crowded facilities across Australia.

All refugees who arrive by boat are transferred to offshore and onshore detention centres, and kept in squalid conditions, where they can remain indefinitely. The entire political establishment—Liberal, Labor and the Greens—is responsible for this "border protection" regime that depicts refugees as "illegal immigrants," denying their right under international law to flee persecution.

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre spokesperson Pamela Curr described the immediate circumstances of the suicide. She said Atay had become increasingly depressed and anxious while waiting for a decision on his protection visa application. He feared being sent back to Afghanistan, having been in detention for 10 months without receiving any information regarding the processing of his visa.

Interviewed on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio, Curr said: "This boy couldn't understand why he was still waiting ... what I'm told by his friends is that he went quietly to his room and locked the door. When they went to the room … it was too late."

Reportedly, when inmates found Atay's body, they refused to allow the detention guards to remove their friend, as tensions continue to mount between staff and detainees over long visa processing waiting times and terrible living conditions. Detainees at Curtin have since mounted hunger strikes over the suicide.

Less than two weeks ago, protests at the Christmas Island detention centre were brutally put down by police, using tear gas and bean bag bullets. The government has since shifted detainees from the Indian Ocean island to other centres on the mainland. As a result, 300 refugees were flown to Curtin, which was already operating above capacity.

More than 1,500 single men and teenagers are now crammed into the disused Curtin air base, some living in tents. Refugee advocates report that there are not enough toilets or showers, and only four or five phones. These conditions increase the likelihood of suicide and self-harm.

Two other instances of self-harm occurred on the same day as Atay's suicide. On average, there is one such incident every day at this facility. Another 22 Hazara men at Curtin have reportedly had their asylum claims rejected, prompting warnings that more suicides could follow.

Because of its isolated and desolate location, the Curtin base is one of the most notorious refugee facilities in Australia. The previous Howard Liberal government shut it down in 2002 after a series of protests and hunger strikes.

Atay's death came just 12 days after the suicide of another Hazara refugee, at the Scherger air force base in far north Queensland. Miqdad Hussain, aged 20, killed himself after the immigration authorities rejected his asylum application. Like Curtin, the Scherger base has become seriously over-crowded. Designed for 300

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people, it currently holds 510 asylum seekers.

Refugee advocates have warned that protests may erupt at Scherger as well. According to a detainee there, last Friday 100 people were unable to eat lunch due to food shortages. An immigration spokesman ludicrously asserted that 40 asylum seekers had simply “declined to have lunch.”

There is no doubt that Hazaras are faced with persecution and murder in Afghanistan. According to the Edmund Rice Centre, which followed the fate of 270 asylum seekers who were sent back by the Howard government, at least nine were killed.

This is of no concern to the Gillard government. Immigration Minister Bowen is pushing ahead with plans to deport rejected Afghan applicants, having signed a repatriation agreement in January with the Karzai government in Afghanistan. Bowen boasted that asylum seekers would be forced back to Afghanistan for the first time. “Never, all through the Howard years, never before today, has there been an involuntary return from Australia to Afghanistan,” he said.

There are currently 2,600 Afghan asylum seekers detained in Australia, of which 80 percent are estimated to be Hazaras. Last April, the government froze Afghan visa applications for six months, and those of Sri Lankan refugees for three months, creating a backlog of claims intended to deter further arrivals.

Bowen recently boasted that the government’s stricter processing requirements had reduced the success rate of Afghan refugee applications from 96 percent to roughly 50 percent. His department last weekend highlighted the fact during the first two months of 2011, the proportion of asylum seekers from Afghanistan had dropped from 46 percent to 15 percent of all boat arrivals in Australia.

Bowen claimed that “people who are not genuine refugees will be returned with dignity and humanity”. In reality, during the past two weeks alone, two people have died as a result of this policy. More deaths are certain to follow.

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