

Australia: Refugee protests continue as long-term detentions soar

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Protests continue in Australian immigration detention centres against the Gillard Labor government's regressive policies that have led to the dramatic increase in long-term detainees and rising levels of mental illness and self-harm incidents among asylum seekers.

Three refugees are maintaining their rooftop demonstration at the Villawood detention centre in Sydney's western suburbs. The men—Iranian Majid Parhizkar, 24, and two stateless Kurds, Amir Morad, 22, and Mehdi Darabi, 24—have not eaten for 10 days. Police are denying them access to food in an attempt to starve them off the roof and have rejected their calls for immunity from prosecution over the protest.

On Monday, about 100 teenage detainees were involved in an angry demonstration at the Broadmeadows detention centre in Melbourne. The facility holds boys under the age of 18. The protest reportedly erupted because one of the teenagers, who had turned 18, was transferred to the nearby Maribyrnong facility for adult males.

Also on Monday, eight men began a rooftop demonstration at the offshore processing facility on Christmas Island, a remote outpost in the Indian Ocean. According to press reports, the men were forced to abandon their protest after Australian Federal Police officers locked 1,000 other detainees in their rooms and told the protesters no one would be allowed outside until the eight came down. A hunger strike which began on Monday is reported to be continuing at the nearby Phosphate Hill “low-security” complex, which is used to hold families.

Protests also broke out at the Curtin facility in the far north of Western Australia last Saturday, sparked by frustration over long visa-processing delays and immigration department decisions to bar refugee

activists entry to the centre that day. While the department claimed that there were only 12 protesters, refugee advocates said that by Monday 200 men were involved in a sit-down demonstration inside the facility, and had not taken any food or water for 72 hours.

Before the 2007 federal election, Labor leader Kevin Rudd pledged to expedite asylum seekers' claims and maintain a 90-day cap on detention. Over the past year, however, the Labor government has substantially increased the average length of detention.

Last April, the government announced a freeze on the processing of asylum claims for Sri Lankan and Afghan refugees of three and six months respectively. Refugees Council of Australia (RCA) spokesman Paul Power estimated that 1,450 refugees were affected by the freeze.

An RCA statement released on Thursday entitled, “Increase in long term detention at heart of unrest,” revealed that the number of people incarcerated in detention centres had almost trebled in the past year, from 2,307 people in March 2010 to 6,819 last month. Of these, 1,030 were children.

Long-term detention, which is defined as exceeding six months, grew seven times faster. In March last year, 258 people were long-term detainees, compared to 3,901 last month. The average time spent in detention was 214 days in February, up from 78 days the year before.

Long-term detention has disastrous impact on the morale of detainees, driving many to desperate measures. The *Australian* newspaper reported yesterday that between July 2010 and February 2011, the number of self-harm incidents in detention centres was more than four times greater the total reached for the 2009-2010 financial year. At least 15 of these incidents involved children, with another 27 serious incidents

requiring hospitalisation of the detainee. In total, 186 incidents of self-harm were documented. This was the highest number since the same period in 2003-2004, when the Liberal-National government of former Prime Minister John Howard was in power.

Inside the detention centres refugees have little idea as to the progress of their asylum applications. This insecurity is compounded by the overcrowded, cramped facilities and trauma suffered those who have fled civil war, torture and political persecution.

The Curtin detention centre is a particularly foul example of this regime. The Labor government reopened the facility, a week after imposing its visa processing freeze, specifically for the detention of Afghan and Sri Lankan refugees.

Notorious under the Howard government, Curtin was closed in 2002 following a string of riots and self-harm incidents. Located about 28 hours by road north of Perth, the Western Australian capital, temperatures in the desolate facility are often in excess of 42 degrees centigrade.

The former air force base currently holds around 1,400 single men, 200 above its maximum capacity. According to refugee advocates, 1,000 of these have had their initial claims for asylum rejected. Last month, one man committed suicide at Curtin, and in the past few months one instance of self-harm is estimated to have occurred every day.

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre spokesperson Pamela Curr told the *World Socialist Web Site* that recent protests at Curtin were sparked by increasing anger over the lengthy delays produced by last year's visa-processing freeze. "These people have been waiting 12 months for a primary decision on their applications," she said. "Others have been waiting 18 months for a review of the primary decision."

Curr said that most detainees were unaware of their rights to appeal against immigration department decisions and found it impossible to gain access to courts. The government's Immigration Advice and Application Scheme provided funding for the provision of legal advice to detainees. Funding for the scheme ended, however, at the internal review stage of claims for asylum, meaning that applicants were left to file further court papers themselves. Lawyers doing pro bono work, moreover, find it almost impossible to communicate with Curtin detainees, where there are a

few accessible phone lines and only one computer per 75 people.

Over the past week the Gillard government has made clear that it will not tolerate any opposition by detainees. Under changes to the Migration Act "character test" announced this week, refugees convicted of any "crime" in detention—and this includes any protest deemed illegal by government authorities—will be denied permanent residence. Instead, they will be issued with a temporary visa or deported.

These changes directly violate the International Refugee Convention, to which Australia is a signatory, which insists that refugees can be denied protection only if they have been proven guilty of crimes against humanity.



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