

# Australian State Coroner reports on three refugee suicides

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The New South Wales (NSW) State Coroner published its findings on December 19 into the suicides of three men within three months at the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre in Sydney. While limited, the details in its report make clear that responsibility for the deaths lies squarely with the Greens-backed minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and its reactionary policy of “mandatory detention” and “border protection.”

The findings were based on a three-week inquest in September that heard testimony from psychiatrists and staff at the Villawood facility. Lawyers represented the men’s families, as well as the Labor government’s Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), and the private contractors SERCO and International Medical and Health Services (IHMS). In 2009, Labor outsourced the operation of the detention network to SERCO and the provision of mental health services to IHMS.

Villawood is one of more than 20 prison-like detention centres throughout the country where asylum seekers are detained without charge indefinitely as their claims for asylum are processed—sometimes for more than two years. Throughout this time the refugees are given no information as to the status of their application.

Josefa Rauluni, a Fijian national, jumped to his death from a balcony on September 20, 2010, the day he was to be forcibly deported to Fiji. Rauluni arrived in Australia in November 2008 and received a tourist visa. He was detained in August 2010 after being refused a bridging visa. Between August and September, Rauluni lodged a number of applications to DIAC to oppose plans to deport him and to appeal for protection on the basis that he faced political persecution in Fiji. His pleas were rejected, including two faxes on September

19, the day before his suicide, in which he stated that if he was forcibly returned it would mean his “dead body.”

Iraqi refugee Ahmed Al-Akabi hung himself in a shower block on November 15, 2010, at the age of 41. He had been in detention for almost a year after arriving by boat at Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean, in December 2009. In April 2010, Akabi was transferred to Villawood after his initial application for refugee status was rejected. That month, Akabi was informed that his sister and her two children had been killed by a bomb in Iraq. Soon after, he went on a week-long hunger strike and was hospitalised. According to the Coroner, he was prescribed Avanza, an anti-depressant.

In October, DIAC informed Akabi that he would be returned to Iraq, despite his declaration that threats had been made against him and his family. Another application to be transferred to a centre in Melbourne, where he could be visited by family and friends, was rejected. On November 15, reportedly after receiving a distressing phone call, Akabi killed himself.

British detainee David Saunders, 29, hung himself in a Villawood shower block. He was purportedly suspected of committing offences relating to the possession and distribution of pornography in Britain but had not been charged. British police had already dropped a second allegation relating to sex offences. Australian police were made aware of the allegations and on November 11, the day after his visa expired, Saunders was arrested and placed in the highest security compound at Villawood. While the exact circumstances are unclear, the fact that Saunders was in a legal limbo contributed to his suicide on December 8.

The suicides arose from the situation facing refugees in detention. In October this year, 27-year-old Tamil

refugee Jayasakar Jayeathana killed himself by ingesting poison while at Villawood. Attempted suicides and other desperate acts of protest—including hunger-strikes and self-inflicted torture such as sewn lips, the ingestion of poison and cuts to the body, often requiring hospitalisations—are a regular occurrence.

According to government figures from November 30, there are 4,409 refugees in detention, including 441 children. DIAC secretary Andrew Metcalfe admitted in October that 228 asylum seekers were on anti-psychotic drugs and 527 on anti-depressant medication. This almost certainly understates the depth of the crisis. A recent report on the ABC television program “Four Corners”, which included interviews with detainees and psychiatrists, showed that detainees were given anti-depressant medication without their knowledge.

This situation is the inevitable result of the Gillard government’s refugee policy. The State Coroner Mary Jerram, however, accepted the framework of Labor’s compulsory detention, saying only: “When government chooses to maintain a detention system, it carries a heavy responsibility.”

The report limited its criticisms to the negligence and bad practices of DIAC and the private operators SERCO and IHMS. Jerram recommended that detainees not be notified of their deportation, or given other “negative decisions,” on a Thursday or Friday, when there are no mental health staff rostered at the facilities. The Coroner also requested that NSW or Federal police be permitted “to provide timely assistance, including trained negotiators, for high-risk situations.” The report urged SERCO to improve procedures for monitoring detainees and recommended that SERCO, IHMS and DIAC develop a policy for sharing information between them.

The government was determined to censor even limited criticism of its draconian treatment of asylum seekers. In a closed submission to the inquest, the Department of Immigration attempted unsuccessfully to prevent the Coroner from making public recommendations to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. The Gillard government is now placing pressure on the Liberal/National Coalition opposition to support an amendment to the Migration Act which would allow the government to swiftly deport all asylum seekers to other countries, such as Malaysia and Nauru, where they would languish indefinitely.

The ongoing policy of compulsory detention makes it inevitable that there will be further suicides.



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