

Australian detainees in hunger strike on Nauru

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A hunger strike by refugees detained indefinitely on the Pacific island of Nauru has escalated in size to almost 300 people after days of protest. Media reports state that 25 people involved in the strike have physically collapsed and seven have been given medical treatment. The asylum seekers are protesting the appalling conditions on the island and the Australian government's refusal to start processing their refugee claims.

The strike began last week, reportedly after an Iranian refugee attempted self-harm, and had spread to 170 asylum seekers by Thursday. The protest reached 276 by the weekend, involving three quarters of the 377 refugees in the detention camp. On their Facebook page, refugees on the island said on Sunday they would continue the strike "to the death".

Explaining their desperate stand, they stated that they were not being given "fair treatment, which affect us physically and mentally" and "this bitter reality tortures us 24 hours" a day. "In our home land we were in a danger of being tortured physically, but here we are facing mental torture."

If the strike were to continue this week, the camp's medical centre and the hospital on Nauru could not deal with the crisis. An Iranian man has reportedly been on a hunger strike for more than three weeks.

The Australian Labor government has responded with callous indifference, belittling the hunger strike, and declaring that it would make no difference to the government's refusal to set a time limit on the detention of the asylum seekers.

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen's spokesman said

immigration authorities had met the protesting asylum-seekers. He would not confirm the refugees had been told they would have to wait six months for refugee status processing to even commence. "But I can confirm we haven't begun processing their claims," he said.

Last Thursday, an immigration department spokeswoman dismissed the hunger strike, saying "just because people have said they are not eating meals does not mean they have engaged in voluntary starvation." Another spokesman declared: "It was reiterated to them that these sorts of activities would have no impact on the outcome of where they're placed."

The conditions facing the refugees, who are housed in tents, are reported to be appalling. A report by the *Age* in early September described the site as having "only the most basic facilities when they arrive, including ... tents, an army cot made of canvas and steel poles" and with long power outages several times a week. The site, located several hundred metres from the country's only rubbish tip, was "also home to large rats".

An anonymous refugee told the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week that the camp was "like a mental hospital" and was making the detainees "mental, making them crazy." He added: "This camp, I think, this is not suitable for anyone. We are humans. I don't think that an animal can survive this."

Hunger strikes became a feature of the first version of the "Pacific Solution" of consigning refugees to remote islands, which was introduced by the previous Liberal government of Prime Minister John Howard. Nevertheless, the inhuman regime continued. Years of detention on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus

Island—up to five years in some instances—led to severe cases of psychological trauma, as well as suicide attempts.

The Labor government's reincarnation of the "Pacific Solution", unveiled in August, goes far further. Interviewed on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Lateline" program last week, Immigration Minister Bowen refused point-blank to indicate a maximum time for the detention of refugees. Moreover, he derided the Liberal Party opposition for proposing a five-year limit. Bowen insisted that detainees would remain on Nauru for the "equivalent" time they would have had to wait for refugee visas had they applied through official channels—which effectively means many years.

In early September, 100 refugees launched a hunger strike on the Australian territory of Christmas Island to unsuccessfully oppose being sent to Nauru. A refugee spokesman at the time told journalists: "We don't want to go [to Nauru] because we don't want to be like others before us who went to Nauru but whose cases were not quickly handled and they had to stay there for six to eight years, so they became mad. They became mentally ill. We don't want that."

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government initially plans to send 1,500 asylum seekers to Nauru and 600 to Manus Island, and is also seeking to revive its "Malaysian Solution" of sending refugees to detention in Malaysia. Last week, it went even further, excising the entire Australian mainland from the migration zone, so that anyone arriving without a visa is barred from applying for one.

In effect, Australia has become a legal "black hole" for asylum seekers, who are denied access to any court or tribunal to challenge their detention or denial of visas. Not only is domestic law overridden, but so is the 1951 Refugee Convention, which enshrines a right to apply for refugee protection.

These regressive measures have bipartisan support from the Liberal-National Coalition and tacit backing from the Greens, who posture as opponents of some of the government's measures. At the same time, the

Greens uphold the underlying nationalist pretext of "border protection" and remain in de facto coalition with the minority Gillard government.

With this political assistance, the Labor government has cynically presented its violation of fundamental legal and democratic rights as a "humanitarian" response. The government claims that it is necessary to introduce such measures to deter people from risking their lives by coming to Australia by boat.

In reality, the narrow opportunities provided for refugees to enter Australia via the official channels, and the lengthy waiting times, force many of the most desperate to risk a dangerous crossing by sea. The inevitable disasters, in which hundreds have perished, are then used as a pretext to introduce even more draconian policies.

The Labor government's flagrant violation of international refugee law has been highlighted by the forced return of 26 asylum seekers to Sri Lanka last week, after they were denied the right to even apply for protection status. Minister Bowen personally announced their deportation, claiming that they had not made any claims for refugee status.

Under the Howard government too, arriving refugees were deliberately not told of the process to apply for protection visas, and denied access to legal advice. Now the Labor government has apparently resumed this practice, as part of its collaboration with the regime in Colombo from which the Sri Lankans are fleeing.



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