

Hunger strike continues in Australian refugee detention centre on Nauru

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Refugees detained by Australia in the tiny Pacific state of Nauru are now in the second week of a hunger strike against their poor conditions and the refusal of the Australian Labor government to process their asylum visa applications.

On the government's instructions, immigration department officials have refused to negotiate with the detainees, and insisted that their actions will not alter the government's decision to halt their applications for at least six months.

An Iranian refugee identified as Ali, told the *Australian* that 45 people had already received medical treatment. "We are trying to continue our hunger strike until the 12th of November," he said. "We want them to start processing our visas, we want them to process our visas in Australia."

By last weekend it was reported that 300 of the 380 refugees at the camp had joined the strike, which began last week. On November 8, according to media reports, 50 people had begun to refuse water. An anonymous detainee told the Fairfax media that that the men were weak and spending their days lying around "and feeling the sickness."

One Iranian refugee, identified in the media as Omid, has been on strike for 27 days. Doctors are reported to have told him that that his heart was under grave pressure. An unnamed refugee told the *Age*: "If you look at him, he is only bone and skin. He says it is better to die than to live in Nauru."

The latest hunger strike follows a previous one in early September. In response, the government has only

hardened its stand. This week, two Iranian asylum seekers have been charged over their alleged involvement in the "riot" in September, when minor damage was done to light fittings and equipment. Australian Federal Police officers and local Nauruan police entered the immigration processing facility on Monday to present the two refugees with court summonses. Another 15 detainees could be charged in coming days.

Immigration department spokesman Sandy Logan has continued to downplay the hunger strike, claiming that just 60 to 70 detainees are involved, as if that lessened what is at stake. At the same time, Logan admitted that some facilities in the detention centre had been shut down as a result of the protest, including the gym, library and some education rooms.

Construction of the camp on Nauru is unfinished, with the refugees being forced to live in tents under hot tropical conditions. This callous disregard for the wellbeing of the refugees in line with the entire premise of the Labor government's "Pacific Solution," which is to intimidate refugees from seeking asylum in Australia by effectively placing detainees in indefinite detention.

So blatant is the violation of basic legal and democratic rights that it triggered a response from Gillian Triggs, the government-appointed human rights commissioner this week. She described the Nauru regime as "an egregious breach of international human rights law." Triggs stated: "Asylum seekers have a legal right under international law to have their claims assessed in a speedy and appropriate way, and this is at risk of being arbitrary detention."

Speaking from Bali, however, where she was attending a “democracy” forum, Prime Minister Julia Gillard dismissed the criticism, saying her government remained determined to “fully implement” its policy. She repeated Labor’s basic position that refugees must be locked away for many years, “so if you get on a boat you don’t get a resettlement option any more quickly than if you had stayed put.”

Gillard justified her response by restating the government’s commitment to the recommendations of her government’s refugee policy review, led by former military chief Angus Houston. Those recommendations, which also included “excising” the entire territory of Australia from its migration zone, in order to block all access by refugees to visa applications and the courts, were fraudulently presented by the government as a humanitarian bid to “save lives” by deterring asylum seekers from trying to set sail for Australia.

On this basis, the media and political establishment, including various “liberal” commentators who previously opposed the Howard government’s less draconian “Pacific Solution” a decade ago, has overwhelmingly swung behind the government. Figures like academic Robert Manne, who were prominent critics of Howard’s measures, have remained completely silent over the desperate hunger strike on Nauru.

Nevertheless, the events on Nauru have begun to shatter the humanitarian mask, generating some critical commentary. Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalist Scott Stephens posted a web site article describing the Gillard government’s policy as “thuggery in humanitarian drag.” Another ABC commentator, Waleed Aly, denounced the “studied, confected compassion” as a “convenient fiction.”

Clearly, no “compassion” has been shown toward those detainees who have been sent back to the countries that they had fled. Immigration Minister Chris Bowen boasted that another 50 Sri Lankan asylum seekers were deported this week, taking the total to 125 since August. This is despite continued evidence of torture and “disappearances” in Sri Lanka.

These refugees were denied the right to apply for protection visas, another flagrant violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

In backing the government’s policies, the opposition Liberal-National coalition has bluntly brushed aside the humanitarian pretence. Shadow immigration minister Scott Morrison said the Gillard government needed to “hold its nerve” on Nauru, in order to make refugees “go home.” Opposition leader Tony Abbott refused to rule out boosting the planned 1,500 capacity of the Nauru detention camp even tenfold in a bid to curb boat arrivals.

This bipartisan line-up against asylum seekers, who are among the most vulnerable members of the international working class, is a warning of the readiness of the Labor government, and the political establishment as a whole, to tear up even the most fundamental legal and democratic rights of working people as the global economic crisis deepens, and the government’s austerity program intensifies.



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