

Nauru refugee hunger striker taken to hospital

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An Iranian asylum seeker in the Australian detention centre on the remote Pacific island of Nauru was taken to hospital on Friday afternoon after being on hunger strike for 36 days. Identified as Omid, he was reported to be excreting blood.

Omid's protest highlights the brutality of the Australian Labor government's policy of transporting refugees to be detained indefinitely on Nauru, or the Papua New Guinea island of Manus, where asylum seekers are expected to be shipped soon as well. Living in tents on Nauru, detainees have been told they will not have their refugee applications processed for the foreseeable future.

In direct violation of international law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the government has declared that asylum seekers arriving in Australian territory by boat will be barred from applying for refugee visas, and will instead be incarcerated on the Pacific islands for as long as it would have taken for them to obtain a visa had they waited offshore. This could mean detention for many years.

There had long been fears about Omid's health. A refugee identified as Mohammed told the Fairfax press last week: "If you see him, you will find him just a skeleton body, 'cause he's too weak. Last time a doctor told him that 'very soon you will hurt and [your] brain will stop working.'"

Asylum seekers have reported through their Facebook page that another detainee, identified as Wasam, was sent to hospital with suspected kidney failure after an 8-day hunger strike. Another five are reported to be continuing their hunger strike, which is entering its 19th day.

At its height, the Nauru hunger strike involved around 300 people. Many of the asylum seekers stopped last week after 12 days, when it was reported

that Amnesty International would inspect the island this Monday. Amnesty's visit, however, will not change the Labor government's course.

In a web blog entry, Amnesty representative Alex Pagliaro said the most important feature of the trip would be talking to asylum seekers and ensuring transparency and accountability—as if the inhuman conditions on the island were unknown. Several media reports have already exposed the trauma the refugees are experiencing in the hot, rat-infested tent city.

An anonymous refugee told the *Age* last weekend he had witnessed two attempted suicides. One man attempted to hang himself and another tried to cut his own throat. The refugee added that the two men were now confined "like mad people." He explained: "The officers have to be there all the time because otherwise they will take the opportunity to go and suicide. People are becoming crazy. There is no hope here."

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government is deliberately using the conditions on Nauru to terrify asylum seekers, hoping to deter them from trying to reach Australia. Last Monday, even as the hunger strike was proceeding, another 24 asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq and Sri Lanka were flown to the island, taking the total number of Nauru detainees to 387. The immigration department stated that such "transfers" would "continue to occur regularly".

The Australian government has further sought to intimidate the detainees on Nauru by orchestrating criminal prosecutions against those taking part in protests. On Friday, 15 asylum seekers were charged with allegedly causing \$24,000 worth of damage during a protest at the camp in late September. Two others were charged the previous week.

Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, last week made a muted criticism of the

“unbearable conditions” in the Nauru camp, saying she was concerned that the Australian government’s scheme was “just going to end up in another regime of indefinite detention.” In reality, it is already clear that Labor’s “Pacific solution” for refugees consists of indefinite incarceration. Prime Minister Gillard and her ministers have repeatedly refused to put any time limits on the detention.

Pillay appealed to the government to put “protections” in place, lest the treatment of asylum seekers on Nauru became a “blight on Australia’s good human rights record.” The truth is that over the past decade, Australia has become notorious internationally for taking ever more draconian measures to bar access to refugees arriving by boat. The Labor government’s version of the “Pacific solution” goes beyond that adopted by the previous Liberal government after it first shipped refugees to Nauru in 2001, where they languished for up to five years.

A protest over deportations also broke out inside a detention centre within Australia. Last Monday, three Fijian detainees climbed onto the roof of Sydney’s Villawood centre for three days, over the imminent deportation of two Fijian people. There were fears they might jump from the roof. In 2010, another Fijian national leapt to his death at Villawood. The detainees eventually came down from the roof following the arrival of Australian Federal Police officers, but their fate has not been reported.

At Villawood and Melbourne’s Broadmeadows centre, two detainees attempted suicide last week after being denied visas, despite being recognised as refugees, because of adverse security clearances by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Detainees blacklisted by ASIO can also potentially remain in detention indefinitely, because they cannot legally be returned to their home countries, where they would face persecution. Moreover, they remain in a legal “black hole”, denied the right to even know why they have been declared security risks.

One suicide victim was officially recognised as a refugee in 2009 but has been detained at Broadmeadows ever since. He was discovered at 2.40 am last Thursday attempting to hang himself. The latest incidents follow suicide attempts in May and October by Tamil asylum seekers in Melbourne, some of whom were also denied ASIO clearances.

As part of its refugee deterrence regime, the government is stepping up the forced removal of asylum seekers to Sri Lanka. Immigration Minister Chris Bowen yesterday confirmed the largest involuntary transfer yet to Sri Lanka—the deportation of 50 people—taking the total to 282 since Labor’s version of the “Pacific solution” took effect on August 13.

These returnees have been denied the right to even apply for protection, and denied access to legal advice, also in breach of international law. Many asylum seekers returning to Sri Lanka, especially Tamils, are reported to have been arrested on arrival and later to have experienced torture and other forms of persecution.



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