Protests continue in Australian refugee detention camps

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Kurdish Iranian asylum seeker, Omid Sorouseh, who had been on a hunger strike on Nauru for over 50 days, was evacuated to Australia in a secret government operation on November 30. He had been taken to a Nauru hospital two weeks earlier, after he began excreting blood. Sorouseh began his hunger strike in October in protest over the Australian Labor government's revived "Pacific Solution", involving the lengthy detention of refugees on Pacific islands on Nauru and in Papua New Guinea.

According to the asylum seekers' Facebook page, eight refugees on hunger strike collapsed on Wednesday after they also began to refuse water. Three of the men were reportedly transferred to a Nauru hospital, where they refused medical treatment.

Other refugees on the island are continuing protests and appeals for help, with a spate of self-harm attempts and hunger strikes. On November 28 it was reported that there were ten self-harm attempts, of which the Australian immigration authorities confirmed six. On December 3, the immigration department confirmed a total of 12 self-harm attempts in the previous week. Asylum seekers have reported that at least 35 people on Nauru are maintaining hunger strikes.

One refugee, identified as Mehdi, told ABC Radio National: "This is not a detention centre, this is a slaughterhouse. This cruel place compels them to attempt suicide and the guys [are] hurting themselves." He added: "In our country, we were living with the fear of being killed physically, but here the government [is] killing us mentally."

The refugees have been protesting against the barbaric conditions in the island camps, as well as the uncertainty over when the Australian government will process their asylum claims. Under the policy announced by Prime Minister Julia Gillard in August, Australia will not grant asylum to anyone arriving in the country by boat, even after they are officially assessed as refugees, until they spend around five years, or longer, in a Pacific detention centre. This illegal policy of indefinite detention is labelled the "no advantage" test. Refugees are to be detained for the length of time—often many years—that asylum seekers wait in camps in Africa or the Middle East before being granted refuge through the narrow and restrictive official channels.

The detention facilities are rapidly filling to capacity. On November 30, another round of refugees from Sri Lanka and Iran, including women and children, were sent to the newly opened facility on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Reports indicate that some also went on hunger strike after being told that their asylum claims would take years to be processed.

The Nauru camp was reported as being barren and rat-infested, even before the first wave of deported refugees arrived. The detainees remain housed in tents, with no permanent structures and little shade in the hot, tropical climate. An Amnesty International report, filed after an inspection of the camp two weeks ago, described the conditions on the island as "completely unacceptable." Refugees lived in cramped conditions, lacking privacy in tents that leaked, were damp and flooded after tropical downpours.

The situation on Manus Island is no better than on Nauru. Entire families there are similarly forced to live in tents, with minimal facilities.

The Gillard government recently announced that refugees who could not be crammed into the Nauru and Manus Island camps would be given so-called bridging visas. Such visas permit asylum seekers to live in Australia outside detention centres, but without any right to work or be reunited with their families. These

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measures also violate basic international legal conventions governing the treatment of refugees.

The Labor government is deliberately making the refugee regime more and more punitive, in order to deter others from seeking to exercise their legal right to asylum and to force those who have arrived to opt for "voluntary" return to their home countries, where they face persecution and imprisonment.

Many others have been forcibly deported after being arbitrarily classified as "economic migrants". Sri Lankan asylum seekers have been especially targeted. More than 540 refugees have been sent back to Sri Lanka since August.

The government this week postponed the deportation of another 56 Sri Lankan asylum seekers, Tamils, after refugee advocates prepared a High Court challenge. The case highlighted the government's procedure of "screening out" asylum seekers, i.e. deporting people after an interview that is sometimes conducted by a solitary immigration officer and lasts only a few minutes. The process involves no investigation of the person's asylum claim, and is not subject to judicial oversight or scrutiny.

Asylum seekers are deported as quickly as just 48 hours after arriving in Australian waters. "This appears to be a deliberate strategy aimed at ensuring that the process is not subject to legal scrutiny," the *Australian* commented today. "When the lawyers do get involved, the government retreats."

The Fairfax press reported on Thursday the case of one group of Sri Lankan asylum seekers who were deported after being "screened out". The men were awoken at 4 a.m. by guards employed by the private security firm Serco, which operates the detention centres within Australia. Refugee Council of Australia chief executive Paul Power said the men "did not have the opportunity to discuss the matter properly with case managers beyond a first interview in which, they believed, their fear of return was ignored." He explained: "Some of the men began to cry, others were begging the Serco staff to act and an older man began vomiting."

The episode underscores the illegality of the Gillard government's refugee regime, which has gone far beyond the draconian measures implemented under the former conservative Howard government.

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