

Australian government rejects refugee protest letter

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The Australian government has dismissed a collective letter of complaint from refugees detained on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, and instead stepped-up its transfer of asylum seekers to the remote island. Another 25 single males, who arrived there on December 29, are believed to include unaccompanied teenagers who arrived on refugee boats without other family members.

More than 155 people, including about 30 children, are now detained on the island, with many housed in tents and shipping containers, as part of the Labor government's reactionary drive to stop refugees seeking asylum in Australia. About 400 asylum seekers are being held in similar conditions on Nauru, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Within months, the two camps will be filled to their planned combined capacity of 2,100.

The Manus Island letter, passed around and signed by detainees, demanded answers about how long they would be incarcerated, and when the processing of their refugee claims would begin. It also protested against their living conditions, saying that the heat and dust were affecting them badly. The letter detailed a range of objections, including the lack of air conditioners and fans, especially for the children. One woman with asthma had twice become unconscious, it stated.

The refugees demanded a response from the Australian Department of Immigration by close of business last Friday. Refugee advocates warned that mass protests could follow, including the resumption of hunger strikes, if the deadline was not met.

Asylum seekers were yesterday reported to have rejected the Immigration Department's reply to their letter. The department confirmed that no refugee processing arrangements were in place but said they may "commence in early 2013". One detainee told the Refugee Action Coalition: "It [the department letter]

has made us disappointed and sad. We did not get an answer to our questions. One lady collapsed from the stress after she was told about the letter and had to be carried to the medical centre. We will have other protests."

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's government has repeatedly refused to place any limit on how long asylum seekers will be kept on the two Pacific islands, even if they are classified as refugees—effectively sentencing them to indefinite imprisonment without trial. The government has declared that the detention will last for as long as the asylum seekers would have to wait in the massive refugee camps in places such as Pakistan, Turkey and Iran, where people can languish for decades.

The appalling conditions in Australia's detention centres further expose the government's claim that its refugee policy is motivated by humanitarian concerns to stop people risking their lives by joining dangerous voyages to Australia. It is increasingly obvious that the government's punitive regime is designed to intimidate refugees and deny them the basic right, enshrined in international law, to seek asylum.

As limited as it is, the 1951 international Refugee Convention not only prohibits governments from refouling (deporting) asylum seekers to face persecution, but also outlaws punishment of, or discrimination against, refugees for seeking asylum without official permission.

Just before Christmas, the government sought to clamp down on the ability of detainees to communicate with the outside world, by restricting their Internet access. The Salvation Army, a Christian organisation appointed to administer the Nauru camp, told asylum seekers it would limit their Internet usage to 30 minutes each, every two days, not allow the swapping of

allocated time between them, or even allow one friend to help another with the Internet.

Previously, asylum seekers had been allowed to swap with each other, which helped them communicate with their families at appropriate times. Detainees had also agreed among themselves, that Mahdi Vakili, an Iranian asylum seeker who manages the Facebook page “Asylum Seekers on Nauru”, could have two hours every morning and evening to get their stories out.

Nauru detainees gathered over 300 signatures on a petition calling for their previous Internet use arrangements to be reinstated. The Internet has often been the only means by which they could expose their intolerable conditions and publicise their protests and hunger strikes, because the media have been barred from the detention centres.

Throughout November and December, the government defied repeated hunger strikes, refusing to make any concessions on living conditions or the length of detention. On December 10, the government even returned a hospitalised hunger striker to Nauru. Kurdish Iranian asylum seeker, Omid Soroush, who had been fasting for over 50 days, had been evacuated to Australia on November 30, two weeks after he had been taken to the Nauru hospital, excreting blood.

The decision underscored the government’s determination to enforce its policy at all costs, regardless of the possibility of hunger striker deaths. As of mid-December, at least two more Nauru detainees, who had either been on hunger strike or attempted suicide, remained in hospital in Australia.

Another disturbing aspect of the government’s anti-refugee policy came to light last week when it was revealed that 976 unaccompanied teenagers were among the asylum seekers who had been released to live temporarily within Australia, because detention centres had become over-crowded. Gillard’s government has refused to permit any of those released to work, forcing them to live on poverty level welfare benefits of about \$430 a fortnight.

Youth welfare groups warned that teenage refugees could spend months either homeless or “couch surfing”. They included orphans whose relatives and parents were lost at sea in refugee boat disasters. Government-sponsored programs had helped some settle into new homes with appropriate guardians or carers. Others have had to use Facebook and social

media sites to find their own carers.

A spokeswoman for Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said the government could not say how many teenagers were failing to find safe accommodation, but would try to provide answers in the near future. “Such information requires substantial resources to collate,” she claimed.

In its severity and callous indifference, the Labor government’s refugee policy has far outstripped that implemented by the previous Howard Liberal government, which first introduced the notorious “Pacific Solution”.



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