

Agonising suicide in Australian refugee detention centre

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The policies of successive Australian Labor and Liberal-National governments are responsible for the agonising death of an Afghani refugee who committed suicide in the Yongah Hill detention facility, 100 kilometres east of Perth, on September 15.

Ali Jaffari, 40, covered his body with a blanket, drenched it in accelerant and set himself ablaze. He died in hospital a day later after receiving burns to 90 percent of his body.

All the circumstances surrounding his death point to the impact of the increasingly draconian measures being taken by governments in Australia, and internationally, to repel asylum seekers amid the mounting wars and the resulting social catastrophes created by the US and its allies.

The state-owned Australian Broadcasting Cooperation (ABC) began its report on Jaffari's death by referring to him as a "convicted child molester." This labelling serves only to obscure any serious consideration of the harsh circumstances that drove him to kill himself in such a way.

Jaffari's life and death embodies the physiological and psychological traumas inflicted on refugees locked up in detention, often indefinitely, by one Australian government after another.

Jaffari came from an impoverished rural outpost in Afghanistan's Ghanzi province. He was a member of the Hazara ethnic minority, which has been historically persecuted. Jaffari and his family received no education. When his father was shot dead in 2003, he and his family fled to Pakistan. In 2010 he left Pakistan, leaving some of his siblings behind, and came to Australia by boat from Indonesia.

Under the previous Labor government, Jaffari was first imprisoned in the "offshore processing facility" on Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, then flown to the remote Curtin detention centre in

northern Western Australia. Later, he was moved to a detention facility in Perth, where he was finally granted official refugee status.

Jaffari was resettled in the Victorian city of Geelong. In November 2012, he was convicted over a sexual incident involving a boy under the age of 18, but the offence was not judged serious enough to warrant imprisonment. Instead, he was placed under a community corrections order (CCO).

Jaffari later confided to a psychologist, who was treating him as part of his CCO, that he accessed 27 child porn images between July 2012 and May 2014. Immigration Minister Scott Morrison, who is now the federal treasurer, then revoked Jaffari's protection visa, thus throwing him back into immigration detention.

Not only did Morrison's arbitrary order prevent Jaffari from completing his obligations under the CCO, it condemned him to indefinite incarceration, because he cannot be deported to Afghanistan due to his refugee status.

Last November, when Jaffari pleaded guilty in a Victorian court to one federal charge of accessing child pornography material, it was evident that far from being a callous sexual predator, he was an uneducated man who did not comprehend the legal consequences of what he was doing. His lawyer, John Kelly, explained that Jaffari "finds it hard to understand how this material (child pornography) can be so readily available and at the same time constitute a crime."

Judge Jane Patrick, presiding over the case, described it as "one of the most difficult situations as a sentencing judge I have faced." She said that in a typical case this offence would only result in another CCO. Given that Jaffari was already detained indefinitely, she gave him a three-month suspended sentence.

There is little doubt that Jaffari's plight—he faced detention for life—would have compounded the traumas he

had already suffered and contributed to his behavioural problems and mental deterioration.

In April this year, Jaffari lost an appeal to stay in Australia, and was moved to the overcrowded Yongah Hill centre. He first attempted to take his life in August by slicing his own throat. Despite this, he was left unsupervised and was able to set himself on fire one month later.

Jaffari's was the second death at Yongah Hill in two months. Mohammad Nasim Najafi, 27, another ethnic Hazara, died on July 31. Nasim, who suffered from epilepsy, was locked up in a two-metre by two-metre cell in solitary confinement after reportedly being attacked by other detainees. His death remains unexplained. According to an official statement, he died of a "suspected heart-attack," but fellow detainees said he was denied medical treatment for two weeks in solitary confinement.

This month, another asylum seeker set himself on fire, in Sydney's Villawood detention centre. He had been in detention since 2010 after fleeing from the United Arab Emirates with his wife and children, who now number six, including a two-month-old baby. He suffered from depression and had previously self-harmed.

In 2014, Leo Seemanpillai, a Tamil refugee held in detention for 18 months, also committed suicide by self-immolation. He confronted being sent back to Sri Lanka, where he could have faced torture and death.

In response to Seemanpillai's death, Morrison rejected any connection between his suicide and his plight. "I don't think we're in any position or, frankly, I don't think anyone else is in a position, to draw any conclusions about what is in a person's mind in that situation," the minister asserted.

While one cannot say exactly what is in a person's mind in that situation, it is clear that the subhuman conditions of detention, indefinite imprisonment and fear of being deported have a severe psychological impact on refugees.

A quarterly International Health and Medical Services (IHMS) report from October-December 2014, released this month by the Immigration Department after a freedom of information application confirmed a direct correlation between mental distress and length of stay in Australia's offshore detention facilities on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

Using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale to gauge anxiety and depressive symptoms, 23 percent of detainees reported moderate or severe distress, nearly double the

rate within Australia, and that this proportion rose as people were detained longer.

The report showed that 57 percent of adults and 44 percent of children in the facilities required the attention of a mental health nurse during the three-month reporting period. It also noted cases of "self-harm:" "IHMS has seen some incidents of self-harm and FFR [food and fluid refusal] on Nauru during this time ... Manus has also reported a number of self-harm incidents and presentations with acute psychosis which have required movement off-site."

These results are likely to underestimate the levels of mental distress suffered by detainees, because the survey was voluntary. The IHMS noted that the higher the levels of detainees' distress, the less likely they were to participate in the survey.

The cruelty and inhumanity inflicted on detained refugees is quite deliberate. It is part of a regime consciously designed to intimidate anyone contemplating finding refuge in Australia. That is why the previous Labor government reopened the detention camps on Manus and Nauru, declaring that refugees would languish in them for many years, and why the current Liberal-National government stepped up the use of the navy to intercept and repel refugee boats.

That policy was reinforced this week. Newly-installed Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was asked in a media interview on Wednesday about the plight of people "stuck" on Manus and Nauru. He professed to have a humanitarian view, saying he had "concerns" about their "situation."

Hours later, however, Turnbull re-emphasised the underlying policy. He told ABC radio: "We cannot take a backward step on this issue. People who come via the peoplesmuggling route will never settle in Australia: that is the one message that has to be absolutely crystal clear."



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