

Two refugees set themselves alight in Australia's Nauru detention centre

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The Australian government has adamantly defended its brutal refugee detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and denounced protests by detainees after two set themselves on fire to highlight their indefinite imprisonment.

Hodan Yasi, a young refugee woman from Somalia, is in a critical condition after setting herself alight on Nauru on Monday, just three days after a 23-year-old Iranian refugee, Omid Masoumali, died of injuries sustained in a similar act last week.

These events further underscore the inhuman conditions and denial of basic legal and democratic rights inflicted on the nearly 1,500 refugees held in these facilities, which health professionals have likened to concentration camps.

The self-immolations came just days after the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Supreme Court ruled that the Australian-run Manus Island centre violated the PNG constitution's ban on the unlawful deprivation of liberty.

The Australian government has defied that ruling, insisting that the PNG government must not shut down the facility, highlighting Canberra's flouting of both domestic and international law, which recognises the right of refugees to seek asylum without being punished or persecuted for doing so.

Yasi, who was reportedly sent to Nauru as a 16-year-old child three years ago, is being treated in a Brisbane hospital for "critical injuries" after being airlifted from Nauru. Reports from Nauru suggest she has severe burns to 70 percent of her body, with her upper body and face most badly affected.

The teenager was returned to Nauru less than a week ago, having been brought to Australia last November after being seriously injured in a motorcycle accident. Early last Wednesday morning, guards forcibly dragged

her, screaming in protest, out of a Brisbane immigration facility.

A 23-year-old Iranian refugee, Omid Masoumali, died in a Brisbane hospital last Friday after setting himself on fire on Nauru during a visit to the detention facilities by UN officials. He cried out to the officials: "This is how tired we are, this action will prove how exhausted we are. I cannot take it anymore."

His death may have been avoided if he had received proper medical treatment. His wife reported that it took two hours for a doctor to see Masoumali, and he received no intravenous pain relief, nor a place to lie down. Graphic videos online show him, covered in severe burns, screaming in a hospital room and pacing back and forth while his wife begs someone off camera to provide medical attention.

"Staff in Nauru hospital couldn't help Omid in any way because they were unequipped," Masoumali's widow told the *Guardian*. "A lack of proper equipment and facilities was the reason that staff couldn't help and treat Omid in the Nauru hospital."

That evening, Masoumali suffered a cardiac arrest and the doctors in Nauru performed emergency surgery on him before he was airlifted out. Upon arrival in Brisbane—22 hours after suffering his burns—Masoumali's wife was told by doctors he was already brain dead.

The government appears determined to gag Masoumali's widow. On Monday she said that she was being confined in a Brisbane hotel by immigration officials, denied access to a lawyer and sedated.

Australian Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton flatly defended the delay in evacuating Masoumali, saying no flight crews were immediately available as there were mandated rest times for aviators. But this is the second time in recent

years in which adequate medical treatment could have prevented the death of a detainee. Hamid Kehazaei, a Manus detainee, died in 2014 after receiving a cut in his foot that became infected.

Dutton also accused refugee advocates of encouraging acts of “self-harm” and peddling “false hope” to asylum seekers that they could pressure the government into releasing them. Pressed by journalists on this allegation, Dutton offered no evidence, instead asserting that his office received “advice” and “intelligence” to that effect.

The government has labelled the protests as acts of “self-harm” to divert from any examination of why refugees have been driven to such desperate actions. In fact, Dutton claimed that refugees were happy to be “settled” in Nauru, a tiny island of 10,000 people in the middle of the Pacific. “Far from living in the hell hole advocates would have you believe, refugees on Nauru are free from a fear of persecution and many are building new lives,” he said.

In reality the latest events are not isolated incidents. Masoumali’s is the third death by an Australian-detained refugee as a result of self-immolation in the past eight months. Ali Jaffari died in September and Khodayar Amini in October, both in mainland Australia.

In January this year, incident logs obtained from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection under freedom of information laws revealed 188 incidents of so-called “self-harm” in Nauru between June 2014 and July 2015, and 55 incidents on Manus Island.

These incidents included swallowing poisons, pouring boiling water over limbs, hanging by bed sheets, stuffing tea bags down throats and deep lacerations using razor blades. In one account by a visiting paediatrician, a girl as young as six attempted to hang herself with a fence tie.

All the circumstances surrounding Masoumali’s death point to the impact of the increasingly draconian anti-refugee measures pursued by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments.

The camps on Nauru and Manus were reopened by the Greens-backed minority Labor government in 2012 for the explicit punitive purpose of detaining refugees for many years, effectively indefinitely, in order to deter any asylum seekers from trying to reach Australia

by boat.

Masoumali was one of 543 asylum seekers imprisoned on Nauru, including 70 children. As of March 20, some had been imprisoned for 1,000 days.

The camp is squalid. A Senate inquiry reported last year that people were housed in mouldy tents without running water or clean sanitation. Most tents have no access to air-conditioning, despite temperatures typically reaching 30 degrees Celsius, with high levels of tropical humidity. There have been numerous reports of verbal and physical harassment by guards.

Refugee groups claimed to have had a “victory” two months ago, when Immigration Minister Dutton allowed a baby and some other Nauru detainees to remain temporarily in “community detention” within Australia while they completed medical treatment. But Dutton has confirmed that these refugees, who included 91 children, are being forced back to Nauru.

In an attempt to win votes in the looming “double dissolution” election, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten has pledged to find new resettlement countries for the Nauru and Manus detainees. But Labor’s only proposal, while in office, was to dump refugees in Malaysia, a scheme that was ruled illegal by Australia’s High Court because of the lack of guarantees of essential refugee rights in Malaysia, including not to be deported back to the countries they fled.



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