

Amnesty report denounces Australia's "cruel" refugee regime on Nauru

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A report published this week by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch further exposes the deliberate violation of the human, democratic and legal rights of about 1,200 men, women, and children who have been detained on the remote Pacific island of Nauru for more than three years after seeking asylum in Australia.

As the report documents, the Australian government has set a brutal model for countries around the world to punish and bar entry to the millions of desperate refugees. There are now more than 60 million globally fleeing persecution, oppression and war, mostly as a result of the wars being waged by the US and its allies, including Australia, throughout the Middle East.

Anna Neistat, an Amnesty research director who conducted the investigation, said: "Australia's policy of exiling asylum seekers who arrive by boat is cruel in the extreme. Few other countries go to such lengths to deliberately inflict suffering on people seeking safety and freedom."

According to the report, the traumatised refugees suffer frequent abuses, inhumane treatment, primitive housing, unpunished assaults and denial of basic medical and psychological services. Despite 915 of the asylum seekers being officially classified as refugees needing protection under international law, all are being held indefinitely, unable to leave the island.

One woman told the researchers: "People here don't have a real life. We are just surviving. We are dead souls in living bodies. We are just husks."

This regime, while vehemently defended by Australia's current Liberal-National Coalition government, was established in 2012 by the previous Labor government, under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, for the explicit purpose of punishing asylum seekers in order to deter others from trying to reach Australia.

The report states that the refugees "endure unnecessary delays and at times denial of medical care, even for life-threatening conditions. Many have dire mental health problems and suffer overwhelming despair—self-harm and suicide attempts are frequent. All face prolonged uncertainty about their future..."

"Refugees and asylum seekers interviewed said they have developed severe anxiety, inability to sleep, mood swings, prolonged depression, and short-term memory loss on the island. Children have begun to wet their beds, suffered from nightmares, and engaged in disruptive and other troubling behavior."

Neistat and other researchers interviewed 84 asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Bangladesh, Kuwait and Afghanistan, including stateless Kurds. They also interviewed several Australian-funded service providers, who supplied information despite risking prosecution under Australian law for doing so.

The refugees initially spent a year or more living in cramped vinyl tents, with filthy toilets, with temperatures indoors regularly reaching 45 to 50 degrees Celsius, and torrential rains and flooding. Those people later classified as refugees were generally provided accommodation in prefabricated units, converted containers or other sub-standard housing.

About one-third of the 1,200 people remain in the tents inside the detention centre, still subject to curfews, banned from bringing smartphones into the camp and monitored by guards.

To visit Nauru, the researchers had to go undercover to break through a wall of secrecy erected by Australia and Nauru's government, which is paid millions of dollars annually to host the detention facilities. Requests by journalists to visit are invariably rejected, doctors and other detention staff face criminal charges for disclosing abuses, Facebook has been banned and

human rights observers have been denied access.

The report emphasises that Australian authorities are well aware of the abuses. The Australian Human Rights Commission, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, a Senate committee and a government-appointed expert “have each highlighted many of these practices, and called on the government to change them.”

Amnesty and Human Rights Watch conclude that the Australian government is guilty of human rights abuses: “By forcibly transferring refugees and people seeking asylum to Nauru, detaining them for prolonged periods in inhuman conditions, denying them appropriate medical care, and in other ways structuring its operations so that many experience a serious degradation of their mental health, the Australian government has violated the rights to be free from torture and other ill-treatment, and from arbitrary detention, as well as other fundamental protections.”

As with every previous inquiry, the Australian mainstream media largely buried the report, and the government dismissed it out of hand. The Department of Immigration and Border Protection said it “strongly refutes many of the allegations” in the report, but refused to provide details on which parts of the report it was refuting.

The report says the self-immolation of 23-year-old Omid Massoumali, an Iranian refugee, in April had a devastating effect on other detainees, triggering rapid declines in mental health. Massoumali was the third refugee within eight months to die in an Australian detention facility after setting himself alight in protest at the inhuman conditions.

At that time, Australian Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton flatly defended the delay in evacuating Masoumali, who might have survived had he received prompt medical care. Dutton branded such protests as politically futile acts of “self-harm” and claimed that the refugees were happy to be “settled” in Nauru.

The reality is that Nauru, just 21 square kilometres (smaller than a major city airport), has been devastated by 40 years of Australian phosphate mining. As a result of Australian colonial rule, most of the island is uninhabitable and uncultivable. Employment opportunities are scarce and basic services, such as health and education, are inadequate.

That is precisely why successive Australian governments—dating back to the “Pacific solution” unveiled by the Howard Coalition government in 2001—have used Nauru, along with Papua New Guinea’s equally impoverished Manus Island, as a punitive location for people seeking refuge in Australia.

Labor’s immigration spokesman Shayne Neumann said his party was “deeply troubled” by the Amnesty report, and Immigration Minister Dutton needed to “immediately investigate these claims.” This is rank duplicity. Labor, which first introduced the mandatory detention of refugees in 1992, remains unequivocally committed to maintaining the “offshore” detention camps.

Last year, Labor joined hands with the government to push through legislation to retrospectively legalise the Nauru and Manus camps. That bill provided the basis for this February’s ruling by Australia’s High Court sanctioning the offshore regime, effectively setting a new global benchmark for the indefinite incarceration of people—“offshore” facilities outside the jurisdiction of the courts.

Likewise, the Greens’ immigration spokesperson, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young said Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull needed to take action on the situation in Nauru. It was the Greens who gave the previous Labor government the parliamentary numbers to remain in office as it reopened the Nauru and Manus camps. The Greens back the underlying “border protection” framework of stopping refugees reaching Australia, except for small numbers of carefully hand-picked people.

The truth is that Australian governments, Liberal-National and Greens-backed Labor alike, have made asylum seekers and immigrants scapegoats for the worsening social conditions being imposed on the working class. Some of the world’s most vulnerable people are being subjected to ever-more lawless imprisonment, setting precedents for wider use around the world.



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