

Australia: Desperate refugee sets fire to himself in a bank

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The bipartisan anti-refugee policy of successive Australian governments led to another tragedy last Friday. A young Rohingya man, who fled Burma as an unaccompanied teenager nearly four years ago, reportedly doused himself with petrol and set himself alight in a suburban branch of the Commonwealth Bank.

Nur Islam, 21, had been living in acute poverty at Springvale, a working class Melbourne suburb. He was on a temporary bridging visa, which not only denied him refugee status but blocked basic social and political rights, including to work.

The petrol spread over the floor and exploded in a fireball, injuring 26 other customers, who mostly suffered from smoke inhalation. Six people received serious burns and two remain in a critical condition in hospital, including Nur Islam.

Exactly four years ago yesterday, the then Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard imposed a new restrictive category of bridging visas on about 30,000 asylum seekers. They were then released from overcrowded immigration detention centres—where many had been held for years—supposedly to “live in the community.”

This new visa classification was even more inhumane than the “temporary protection visas” (TPVs) introduced by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government, which barred permanent residency and family reunion rights to refugees—even if they were officially recognised as needing protection from persecution.

TPV holders live in limbo, and endless fear of deportation, compelled to reapply for visas every three years. Bridging visa holders are in an even more precarious situation, with the government able to revoke their visas at any time, and expel them. Denied

the right to work, they have to subsist on welfare payments set at 89 percent of poverty-level unemployment benefits. For Nur Islam, this meant living on about \$30 a day.

The motivations behind Nur Islam’s alleged actions are not yet clear, but a worsening mental illness no doubt contributed. His visit to the bank failed to provide him with desperately needed money, following a recent cut to his meagre fortnightly welfare payments. The circumstances of the horrific incident suggest that it was an attempted suicide and not an attack on innocent bystanders.

Over the past few years, numbers of refugees have been driven to suicide by the brutal government-imposed regime that is designed to force them to return to the countries they fled.

Adding to Nur Islam’s anxiety would have been reports that the current Liberal-National government is preparing to deport many refugees. The 30,000 bridging visa holders were expecting letters before the end of the year advising them that they face expulsion. Many refugees have also had bridging visas expire and then suffered lengthy delays in securing visa renewals. In the meantime, they literally live in the shadows of society, depending on charities to survive.

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project worker, Sister Brigid Arthur, told the media that bridging visa holders are denied “any kind of certainty or security about their future, and [it] has them living in poverty and isolation.” If they work illegally for cash-in-hand they are prone to super-exploitation by unscrupulous employers, who can threaten to report them to the immigration authorities.

Any breach of the code of conduct attached to bridging visas can result in refugees being thrown back into detention. The code bans “disruptive activities that

are inconsiderate [or] disrespectful”—a definition that is both arbitrary and bars them from legally protesting against their plight.

Some details of the traumatic conditions of Nur Islam’s life have begun to emerge. He fled Burma as a 17-year-old—one of the 1.5 million Rohingya now living precariously in other countries. They are Muslims, persecuted and still denied citizenship rights by the Burmese government led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Australian government’s plans for deportations take place amid renewed repression by the Burmese military against the Rohingya with reports of rapes, the levelling of villages and a rising death toll.

Australian Burmese Rohingya Organisation spokesperson Habib Habib told reporters that more than 90 percent of Rohingya refugees are still on bridging visas, some for as long as four years. Even to apply for temporary protection visas, they face years of delay. The government has cut legal aid funding, forcing refugees to pay huge lawyers’ fees or await pro bono legal assistance.

Nur Islam arrived by boat in 2013 and was immediately detained by the Labor government on Christmas Island, an Australian outpost in the Indian Ocean. He was later transferred to a detention centre near the remote town of Weipa in far northern Queensland. Eventually he was granted a bridging visa.

The young man lived in a dilapidated house with other Burmese refugees in Springvale, where 70 percent of residents were born overseas. He slept in the living room with people he met while in detention.

His housemate told the media that Nur Islam’s mental health deteriorated as he claimed to have seen ghosts, talked to himself and spent nights wandering in the house’s backyard. His mother had asked him to send money to assist his older sister, who had been hospitalised in Burma, and Nur Islam was distraught at having nothing to send.

In mid-2013, the last Labor government, then headed by Kevin Rudd, escalated the attack on refugees by reopening Australia’s primitive “offshore” detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, and consigning all asylum seekers who arrived after that date to be incarcerated in these facilities indefinitely.

Victorian state Labor Premier Daniel Andrews tried

to cover up this record when he told the media that the Springvale bank fire “ought not to be used as a political weapon by anybody who finds fault with any of the policy settings we have at the moment.”

Ostensibly, Andrews was referring to right-wing groups calling for a Donald Trump-style ban on Muslim immigration in the wake of the incident. But his comments sought to obscure the reality that the tragedy was the outcome of the policies of successive federal governments, including the previous Greens-backed Labor government.

By repelling, detaining or imposing dehumanising conditions on refugees, Australian governments are not only flouting international law—the 1951 Refugees Convention recognises a right to seek asylum without being punished or discriminated against.

Governments, federal and state, are also demonising refugees—some of the most vulnerable members of society—and effectively blaming asylum seekers for the worsening destruction of jobs, living standards and basic social services being produced by the capitalist profit system itself.

This offensive is deepening. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government is now preparing legislation to impose a lifetime ban on refugees who try to reach Australia, barring them from ever entering the country, even to visit their families. It is also planning a cruel refugee swap with the United States, blocking many of the victims on both sides of the Pacific from rejoining their families.

One can only imagine the distressing impact of these announcements on a mentally fragile young Rohingya refugee living in dire poverty, and with his fate resting with the Australian government.



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