

# Australia's refugee detention regime claims its fifth victim on Manus Island

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Hamid Shamshiripour, a 31-year-old Iranian man imprisoned by the Australian government for nearly four years on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, died in unexplained circumstances on August 7 in Lorengau. His body was found near a “transit centre” where the refugee detainees are now being forced to relocate.

Shamshiripour's preventable death is the result of the brutal policies pursued by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments in Australia to repel all asylum seekers, under the reactionary banner of “border protection.” His fate also highlights the terrible conditions into which the detainees are being thrust in the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre (ELRTC).

The Australian-funded and controlled Manus Island detention centre is set to be closed by October 31, after being ruled illegal by the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Supreme Court last year. The remaining detainees are being forced into the less secure ELRTC, despite determined protests by the detainees, who fear for their safety.

Even though refugees are still living in the detention centre the Australian government has started shutting off the power and removing basic amenities. In response to the detainees' protests it has threatened police violence.

Shamshiripour's death is the fifth to occur among Manus Island detainees since Australia's Greens-backed Labor government reopened the detention camp in 2012. In July 2013, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced that none of the hundreds of refugees incarcerated on Manus Island or Nauru, the site of the Australia's other remote “offshore” facility, would ever be permitted to live in Australia.

Rudd declared: “Asylum seekers who come here by boat without a visa will never be settled in Australia.” Less than a month later, in August 2013, Shamshiripour

was imprisoned on Manus Island, where he would languish until his death, almost exactly four years later.

Shamshiripour was a musician who loved to play the guitar and write music. According to his friend Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish-Iranian journalist imprisoned on Manus Island, his music and lustre for life began to disappear while imprisoned in the centre. “Over time,” Boochani wrote in an article for the *Huffington Post*, “Hamid the musician began to disappear, he was becoming a different person. His mental health was deteriorating rapidly.”

Shamshiripour's story is one of immense psychological suffering, as well as abuse at the hands of guards, paid for and overseen by the Australian government. Documents obtained by *Buzzfeed* reveal that when Shamshiripour first arrived on the island his mental health was deemed average. He was previously a heating and cooling system technician in an oil refinery and had dreams of finishing his studies to become an IT technician.

He arrived at the Manus Island centre with a serious knee injury that remained untreated. By December 2013, his knee had swelled and locked up. He reported that the pain kept him up at night and he walked with a limp. He did not receive a cortisone injection for his knee until February 2014, six months after arriving at the island. Case notes around this time also noted Shamshiripour was “having nightmares” and was “feeling stressed” about his family.

Boochani wrote that while living in the detention centre, Shamshiripour got into an argument with Wilson Security, the firm hired by the Australian government to guard the facility. Wilson Security reported him to the local police who beat him in a confinement room before sending him back to the centre, heavily sedated. According to reports, this

experience had a profound effect on Shamshiripour's psychological wellbeing.

Later Shamshiripour was in another incident with Wilson Security in which "the officer was trying to force him to go to bed by pushing him into a room, but he resisted and pushed the officer back." This resulted in Shamshiripour being prosecuted and imprisoned for 36 days. According to Boochani, that was because the International Health and Medical Services (IHMS) refused to confirm he had psychiatric problem. The IHMS is another company contracted by the Australian government, supposedly to provide medical treatment for those imprisoned in the camps.

Shamshiripour was then transferred to the ELRTC at Lorengau, the major town on Manus Island. Through this process Shamshiripour deteriorated further. Boochani recounted that he would talk incessantly, not allowing others to sleep and occasionally strip down to his boxers and walk down the main road of Lorengau.

"Most of the time he was hungry and homeless," Boochani noted. "The small children mocked him and annoyed him. Some refugees, local people and police would beat him because of his mental health condition. Most would run away from him because of his behaviour."

Questions remain over Shamshiripour's death, which PNG police rapidly declared a suicide. Some asylum seekers on the island fear Shamshiripour was murdered and are calling for an independent investigation and autopsy. There have been numerous incidents of asylum seekers at the ELRTC being beaten, robbed and abused at the hands of local police.

"I feel like trash in limbo," refugee Abdul Aziz Adam told Fairfax Media. "We are expendable to your government. All we are looking for is shelter and a safe place." Adam said at least nine people had been attacked with machetes and bashed in recent weeks alone.

Australia's Liberal-National government, like its predecessors, treats the refugees with contempt, intent on punishing them in order to deter any asylum seekers from trying to reach Australia. It is currently threatening any refugee who refuses to relocate to the ELRTC with being excluded from a supposed US agreement to take detainees from Manus Island and Nauru.

This US deal has always been a cruel hoax, as

confirmed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's recently leaked phone conversation with US President Donald Trump. Turnbull reassured Trump that a quid pro quo deal that Turnbull struck last year with Barack Obama, agreeing to take a number of Latin Americans detained in US refugee camps, did not oblige the US to take a single person from Manus Island or Nauru.

The agreement, Turnbull explained, "does not require you to take 2,000 people. It does not require you to take any ... Every individual is subject to your vetting. You can decide to take them or to not take them after vetting ... The obligation is to only go through the process."

In the conversation Turnbull also voiced his support for the Trump administration's initial anti-Muslim travel ban, which sought to halt travel to the US from six countries, including Iran, Shamshiripour's home country. "We are very much of the same mind," he told Trump. Speaking of the 12,000 carefully-vetted Syrian refugees the Australian government had agreed to allow into the country, he said 90 percent would be Christians. "It will be quite deliberate."

Successive Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, have pioneered the systematic abuse, torture and discrimination of asylum seekers. As the global refugee crisis worsens, other governments are emulating these methods.



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