

Tamil refugee dies in Australian detention on Manus Island

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The Australian government's offshore refugee detention regime claimed another victim on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) this week. PNG police confirmed yesterday that Rajeev Rajendran, a 32-year-old Tamil asylum seeker from Sri Lanka, died at Lorengau Hospital in the early hours of Monday morning, allegedly as a result of suicide.

Rajendran is the sixth refugee to die on Manus Island, and the second in two months. The tragic death is the latest incident underscoring the criminal character of the offshore detention regime maintained by successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

Under the policy, refugees such as Rajendran, who try come to Australia by boat to seek asylum, are confined to detention centres in the Pacific, where they are subjected to years of uncertainty and treatment described by the UN as "inhuman" and akin to "torture."

While information remains scanty, the circumstances of Rajendran's death point to criminal neglect on the part of PNG and Australian authorities. They apparently did nothing to provide him with medical assistance for serious mental health issues, or take basic precautions to prevent him from attempting suicide.

Rajendran was one of a number of asylum-seekers transferred to the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre (ELRTC), in the lead up to the closure of the main Manus Island detention centre on October 31. The PNG Supreme Court has declared that facility "illegal" and the detention of refugees as unconstitutional.

The Australian government has begun shutting off power and removing basic amenities for refugees who remain at the Manus Island detention centre.

Asylum seekers at the ELTRC have reported that they face a highly insecure situation. One told the *Guardian*

last month that refugees in the facility, who are able to go to the main town of Lorengau, have been the target of robberies and assaults, including with machetes, by local residents.

Abdul Aziz, a Sudanese refugee who knew Rajendran, told the Australian Associated Press that he was transferred to the ELTRC four months ago. According to Aziz, Rajendran had a psychiatric appointment at the Manus Island detention centre, but was held in isolation for four to five days, before being moved to the Transit Centre.

"He was nice guy and quiet guy," Aziz said. "In the past few months he's been having... mental problems and was in need of care. If he was offered appropriate health care and support he wouldn't have to take his own life. There are not enough doctors or proper treatment."

According to Aziz, Rajendran had attempted suicide three days before he died, but was saved by fellow asylum-seekers. He was then transferred to Lorengau Hospital, where, according to police, he hanged himself between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. on Monday morning.

Rajendran was charged early this year with the rape of an 18- or 19-year-old local woman. According to refugee advocates, he denied the charges and was preparing a vigorous defence in court. Refugees have previously been targeted by local police and military forces, including an armed attack on the Manus Island detention centre, which was whitewashed by Australian and PNG authorities.

Rajendran was a victim of successive Australian governments, which backed the persecution of Tamils in Sri Lanka by Colombo governments and then denied him the right to seek asylum when he fled.

According to the Australian Tamil Refugee Council, Rajendran left Sri Lanka in 2013 after being threatened

by the military, amid the ongoing crackdown on the Tamil population following the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009. Rajendran was from Skandapuram in the northern province of Kilinochchi, where thousands of Tamils have been “disappeared” by the military.

Australia has been intimately involved in the repression. In 2009, under the former Labor government, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) began training and equipping Sri Lanka’s Criminal Investigation Department, an agency notorious for the torture of political opponents of the government. The AFP even provided the department with white vans, which have become synonymous with its program of extrajudicial kidnappings, especially directed against the Tamil population.

In 2012, the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government introduced a policy of forcefully returning Tamil refugees to Sri Lanka. Despite well-documented cases of torture, unjust imprisonment, and extrajudicial killing by Sri Lankan authorities, Gillard declared that it was “safe” for Tamils to return.

This policy, which has continued by the Liberal-National government, was upheld by the Supreme Court last month. In its decision, however, the court acknowledged that all of the hundreds of Tamil refugees deported had been arrested on their return to Sri Lanka, conceding that they faced “torture, maltreatment and violence.”

In a statement, Tamil Refugee Council spokesman Kumar Narayanaswami noted: “Like many other Tamils, Rajeev had been waiting for more than four years for a decision on his application for protection.” He added that Rajendran “was aware of Immigration Minister Peter Dutton’s statements that the authorities intend to deport Tamil asylum seekers regardless of the legitimacy of their claims under the Refugee Convention.”

Dutton’s recent statements have featured a torrent of abuse directed against refugees, which is aimed at whipping-up a right-wing constituency to stave-off the deepening crisis of the Liberal-National government.

Last week, Dutton branded 52 asylum-seekers transferred from Manus Island and Nauru to the United States, under a brutal “people swap” policy, as “economic refugees.” He obscenely declared: “somebody once said to me that we’ve got the world’s

biggest collection of Armani jeans and handbags up on Nauru waiting for people to collect it when they depart.”

The contempt for refugees expressed by Dutton has been extended to Rajendran’s family. The Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka has reportedly told them they will need to pay \$US9,000 to have Rajendran’s body repatriated.

“We don’t know how we will find this amount of money,” Rajendran’s cousin, Matty, told the Tamil Refugee Council. “Why would they do this to us? They have taken our dear Rajeev from us—is this not enough? But now they demand a fortune as well.”

While Labor and the Greens have sought to distance themselves from Dutton’s openly racist remarks, the minister’s rant is the logical outcome of policies pursued by the entire official political establishment. The Greens-backed Gillard Labor government reopened the concentration camp on Manus Island in 2012. Both those parties are thus responsible for the torture and violence inflicted on hundreds of refugees over the ensuing years.



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