

Whistleblowers expose Australian government crimes at Nauru refugee camp

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Over the past week medical professionals and social workers have blown the whistle on the dire conditions facing refugees being held in Australian detention on the tiny Pacific Island nation of Nauru. They have reported widespread trauma and self-harm among children, untreated health problems and medical crises threatening deaths.

The exposures are a damning indictment of successive federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, which have denied asylum to refugees seeking to arrive in Australia by boat, consigning them indefinitely to virtual concentration camps.

The reports have shown that a number of children have suffered life-threatening medical crises. One staff member on Nauru told the *Guardian*: “Everyone on the island knows how serious this is. We have been saying for months a child is going to die in these circumstances.”

Anonymous statements from government employees, published by the *Guardian*, revealed that at least three children were flown from the island to Australia last week to receive urgent medical care.

On Friday a federal court judge ordered that a female child be transported immediately to Australia for hospitalisation. For much of the past three weeks she had refused to eat or drink.

Three separate doctors had issued reports to government authorities calling for her to be flown to Australia. They stated that she was suffering from “resignation syndrome,” a condition common among imprisoned child refugees who withdraw from all interaction and activity.

According to the *Guardian*, the girl recently told an Australian advocate: “I can’t live in this island anymore. I hate everything and everyone around me. I hate to go outside. We left our country to have a good

and better life, but we faced the worst life ever, the life which forced us to end it.”

In another case, authorities had repeatedly blocked the medical transfer of a 12-year-old Iranian refugee boy to Australia despite warnings from staff that he could die. As of last week the boy, who has been imprisoned on the island for five years, had refused all food and water for up to a fortnight and was being fed intravenously. A staff member stated: “They know about this in Canberra but nothing is happening.”

One of the children reportedly removed from the island last week was a 14-year-old boy who has not left his bed for at least four months. Medical staff reported that his depression was so severe he no longer ate, washed or went to the toilet. They warned that he may suffer permanent disabilities as a result of severe muscle wastage.

Other child victims are even younger. The *Guardian* reported on the case of Ahoora, a seven-year-old whose Iranian family has been incarcerated on Nauru since he was just three-years-old.

The boy cannot read or write, has been prescribed strong anti-depressants, and has been described by doctors as experiencing “deep psychic suffering” and post-traumatic stress disorder. They have warned that these conditions will only worsen with continued imprisonment.

Ahoora’s mother self-harms by burning herself with cigarettes. She sent a letter of complaint about the treatment of her son to the company that manages the refugee camp, Canstruct, daubed in her own blood.

Confidential government documents obtained by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7:30” program, aired on Monday night, revealed shocking suicidal crises among the more than 100 children detained on Nauru.

In one instance last June, a 14-year-old girl doused herself in petrol as she was holding a lighter. In another, a ten-year-old “attempted to self-harm by ingesting some sharp metal objects,” which appeared to be taken from fencing wire.

Dr Vernon Reynolds, a child psychiatrist who worked at International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), an Australian government contractor on Nauru, told “7:30” he was “surprised” that no refugee children had yet taken their life on the island. He insisted that Australian authorities were “neglecting these kids,” and that if nothing were done, further injuries, and possibly deaths would occur.

Reynolds had been due to return to Nauru in April, but was allegedly blocked by Australian authorities who were hostile to his clinical recommendations and critical reports.

Fiona Owens, a social worker who headed IHMS’ child mental health team on the island from May to July, told “7:30”: “The only thing a lot of the children are thinking about is how to die. They Google it on the internet. The extreme possibilities are death of children, death of adults, continual death of adults and children.”

Jacinta O’Leary, another whistleblower who worked as a nurse on Nauru last year, reviewed the trauma caused by the government’s refusal to transfer refugee women to Australia for abortions. Until threatened court action late last year, the Australian government had claimed, for several months, that all medical treatment, including pregnancy terminations, was the responsibility of Nauru authorities. Abortions are illegal in Nauru.

The whistleblowers have taken a courageous stand in defence of democratic rights and against the bipartisan persecution of refugees. Current and former staff who expose crimes at detention centres have previously been threatened with prosecution and imprisonment.

The 2015 Border Force Act passed by the Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor Party made it a crime for any person working in a detention centre to publicly reveal the conditions of asylum-seekers, with “violations” punishable by up to two years’ incarceration.

The government last year made amendments to the legislation in response to legal action taken in the high court. The changed laws, however, included punishments for the release of information that could

harm “national security,” a sweeping and vaguely defined provision.

The dire plight of refugees on Nauru is a damning indictment of the entire political establishment. It was the Greens-backed minority Labor government that, in 2013, reopened the brutal detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, and decreed that the asylum-seekers incarcerated in them would never be allowed to set foot in Australia.

This vicious program has made Australia a world “model” for the abrogation of the right to asylum and the brutal persecution of the most vulnerable sections of the working class, fleeing US-led wars, invariably supported by Australia, and government persecution. The country’s “border protection” program has also been hailed by US President Donald Trump, along with neo-fascists across Europe.



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