Young girl imprisoned on Nauru at “high risk of suicide” if not evacuated to Australia

Max Newman
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A 12-year-old girl, incarcerated in the Australian-controlled refugee detention centre on the small Pacific island nation of Nauru, has made multiple suicide attempts and is at high risk of death if she is not immediately evacuated and taken to Australia.

According to medical professionals and social workers, the child is one of dozens of detainees under the age of 18 who are suffering trauma and at risk of suicide due to their imprisonment on Nauru for up to six years—since the last Australian Labor government reopened the facility in 2012.

Doctors treating her say the girl is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and a major depressive disorder. She is eating practically nothing and has made multiple attempts to kill herself, including dousing herself in petrol and trying to set herself alight. She told a psychiatrist that death is “only way to get out of here” and it “is better being dead than here.”

A doctor’s report filed on September 11 stated that if she “does not receive treatment, her physical and mental health are very likely to continue [their] deterioration, with an ongoing high risk of suicide or death secondary to the consequences to dehydration or malnourishment.” The doctor recommended that “she be moved to an appropriate child and adolescent inpatient facility at the earliest opportunity.”

This report was filed after she collapsed and was taken to the hospital in Nauru, only to be discharged a few hours later. The report detailed the need for her to have “intravenous fluids” and “nasogastric feeding” if her minimal food intake persists. However, “there are no facilities of this nature on Nauru” the report warned.

Against the backdrop of the 18-member Pacific Island Forum, which was held on Nauru and concluded on September 5, numerous stories and reports have surfaced on the horrendous conditions facing the roughly 900 detainees still on the island, 109 of whom are children.

Prior to the forum, medical and social workers blew the whistle on the life-threatening medical crisis faced by many of the detainee children on Nauru. Numbers of children were evacuated from the island, only after repeated warnings from health care professionals, and the story was leaked to the Australian media. But the underlying conditions have only worsened since then.

Just before the opening of the forum, the Nauruan government made clear that reports on the plight of the detainees would be suppressed. First, it published a series of tweets claiming that the children were “being manipulated into self-harm by some of their families (supported by activists) in a disgusting & tragic political game.”

President Baron Waqa reiterated this lie when interviewed by Australia’s “Sky News,” stating: “We tend to think that these kids are pushed into something that they’re not aware of. It’s a way of working the system and probably short circuiting it just to get to Australia.”

In the lead up to the forum, Waqa’s authoritarian regime banned Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalists from attending. Those journalists who were granted visas were explicitly told to report on the Pacific Island Forum and nothing else. This was strictly enforced. When one New Zealand reporter was caught interviewing a refugee she was arrested, questioned for four hours and had her accreditation to cover the event revoked.

Next, the Nauruan government blocked the transfer of a critically ill refugee to Australia for treatment. A senior official said it was “not convinced” she needed to be transferred. Sources told the media that no such transfers were permitted during the forum so as to not embarrass Nauru.

Backed by Canberra, Waqa’s dictatorial government has imprisoned and deported all opposition party leaders. The conditions facing the asylum seekers on Nauru are

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above all the responsibility of successive Australian governments, including the previous Greens-backed Labor administration.

Nauru is a virtual client-state of Australia as a result of decades of imperialist plunder. After the island was discovered to be rich in phosphate reserves, Britain, Australia and New Zealand set about stripping the tiny 21-square-kilometre island, excavating one-third of its land before granting formal independence in 1968.

By the 1980s, the phosphate prices dropped, and the economy was in crisis. By the late 1990s nearly all the phosphate reserves were gone. Nauru was left with unemployment sitting at 90 percent and the once tropical island resembled the surface of the moon, scarred by large rock craters.

Today, virtually no area of the land can produce fresh food. Nearly all the island's food and water comes from imported canned and processed food products—over 92 percent from Australia. The health of those on the island has dramatically deteriorated. Nauru has the highest obesity rate per capita of any country in the world, with 95 percent overweight or obese.

The economic and social crisis facing Nauru was exploited by Australia's Howard Liberal-National government in 2001 when it established the refugee prison camp, which came with an increase in financial aid. Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd closed the camp in 2008 but was replaced by Julia Gillard who reopened it in 2012. By that time the facility's revenue amounted to one-fifth of the Nauru economy and in 2013, it became the second highest employer on the island, after the Nauruan government.

While Nauru's government presides over the inhumane conditions inflicted on the asylum seeker population, it is obeying the dictates of the Australian political establishment. Both the Labor and Coalition parties are committed to denying the refugees entry to Australia indefinitely, as part of their efforts to scapegoat asylum seekers and immigrants for the worsening working and living conditions of the Australian working class.

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