

Nauru expels another doctor amid growing protests over Australia's refugee detention centres

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The government of the tiny Pacific nation of Nauru, doubtless collaborating with Australian authorities, has responded to growing condemnations of the dire conditions at its Australian-controlled refugee camps by seeking to silence medical professionals and critics.

Last Wednesday, Nauruan police reportedly detained Dr Nicole Montana, a senior medical officer for IHMS, the Australian-based contractor in charge of health services at the detention facilities. Montana had allegedly taken a photograph of a detained child. Photography by medical professionals has been banned, in a transparent attempt to prevent images exposing the appalling conditions.

Montana was reportedly expelled from the island, but the Australian government issued no protest. Nauru's government responded to the media reports by declaring that Montana was "welcome to return."

Only last month, however, another doctor working as the IHMS senior medical officer, Dr Christopher Jones, had his visa revoked after clashing with authorities over Nauru's refusals to medically evacuate seriously ill refugees.

Montana was deported a week after Nauru forced Médecins Sans Frontières health workers to leave the island. The government claimed that the charity's psychological and psychiatric services were "no longer required." It rebuffed international calls for the medical professionals to be allowed to remain on the island.

Nauru's government has previously banned journalists from entering the island, to prevent them reporting on the plight of detainees. Authorities on the island, which has a population of just 13,000, depend heavily on Australia and closely coordinate their actions with Canberra.

Médecins Sans Frontières had given patients their medical files, assisting them to make legal applications to the Australian Federal Court for transfers to Australia on emergency medical grounds. Nauruan authorities opposed many of the transfers.

According to the organisation, at least 78 of its patients on Nauru had either considered self-harm or attempted suicide.

At an October 11 media conference, after the organisation was evicted from the island, its Australian director, Paul McPhun, described the detention centre on Nauru as "an open-air prison."

McPhun stated: "While many asylum seekers and refugees on Nauru experienced trauma in their countries of origin or during their journey, it is the Australian government's policy of indefinite offshore detention that has destroyed their resilience, shattered all hope, and ultimately impacted their mental health."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and many medical professionals have demanded that the asylum-seekers imprisoned at Nauru and another camp on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island be transferred to the Australian mainland.

The calls follow a series of reports documenting a humanitarian crisis, characterised by the gutting of minimal healthcare services and attempted suicides by traumatised refugees, including children.

Successive federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have denied refugees the right to seek asylum, in violation of international law, consigning them indefinitely to concentration camp-like centres.

UNHCR spokeswoman Catherine Stubberfield told the press on October 13 that medical services at the detention facilities were "collapsing" and serious

psychological and physical ailments were being left untreated.

Stubberfield rejected the Australian government's assertion that "such cases are solely 'matters for Papua New Guinea and Nauru'." She noted that although the centres are nominally run by the authorities of those countries, "Australia has simultaneously designed, financed and managed the system."

The UNHCR spokeswoman said there had been more medical evacuations from Nauru to Australia in September, than in the previous two years. This did not, she said, express "any moderating of stance" by the Australian government, but was a result of "the longstanding poor healthcare situation and a recent worsening of conditions."

Stubberfield noted that no refugees had been evacuated from Manus Island, despite "a clear and urgent imperative for medical evacuation."

On October 15, Australian Medical Association representatives delivered a letter to Prime Minister Scott Morrison calling for the immediate transfer to Australia of all children and families detained on Nauru. Almost 6,000 medical professionals endorsed the letter.

Shocking reports continue of the disturbed psychological state of dozens of refugee children imprisoned on the island. In August, whistleblowers warned that children were at risk of death, with many suffering "resignation syndrome," a condition characterised by a complete withdrawal from interaction and activity.

In one case, authorities repeatedly blocked the medical transfer of a 12-year-old Iranian boy to Australia, despite warnings from staff at the facility that his life was in danger. The boy had refused all water and food for up to a fortnight and was being fed intravenously.

Medical professionals reported that another Iranian boy, Ahoora, 7, who had been in detention since he was just three-years-old, was experiencing "deep psychic suffering" and post-traumatic stress disorder, which was being worsened by his continued incarceration. The boy's desperate mother had repeatedly self-harmed by burning herself with cigarettes and had written a letter of complaint about her family's treatment daubed in her own blood.

Confidential Australian government documents,

screened on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7:30" program, revealed major recent suicidal crises among children on the island. In one instance, a ten-year-old "attempted to self-harm by ingesting some sharp metal objects" which appeared to be from fencing wire. A 14-year-old girl doused herself in petrol as she was holding a lighter.

The Liberal-National government has flatly rejected all demands for the detention facilities to be closed. It is intent on whipping up nationalism, racism and anti-immigrant xenophobia to divert, in a reactionary direction, widespread anger over falling wages and a deepening social crisis in Australia.

Senior figures in the Labor Party opposition have adopted a sham posture of concern over the humanitarian disaster on Nauru. Labor's shadow cabinet on Monday resolved to move a private members bill in parliament, supposedly to make it easier for refugees to be transferred to Australia for medical treatment.

This is a desperate attempt to cover up Labor's responsibility for the unfolding catastrophe, and to assuage growing anger among ordinary people over the plight of the refugees.

It was the Keating Labor government that in the 1990s introduced mandatory detention for asylum-seekers who arrived in Australia by boat. In 2012, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard reopened the concentration camps on Nauru and Manus Island and decreed that the refugees imprisoned there would never be granted asylum.

Backed by the trade unions, the current Labor leader, Bill Shorten, a senior Gillard government minister, has no less than the Coalition sought to promote jingoism and nationalism. In the lead-up to a federal election, to be held before May, Shorten has repeatedly stated that a government he led would "stop the boats," i.e., block refugees from exercising their right to seek asylum.



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