

Australia's imprisoned refugees plead for release as coronavirus risk increases

Max Newman
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Asylum seekers incarcerated in punitive detention centres across the Australian mainland have issued a letter to Liberal-National Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison pleading for their release.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are “anxious and scared,” the letter states. They are being held “in a potential death trap in which we have no option or means to protect ourselves.”

Their living conditions make it impossible to self-isolate, the letter explains. “We are sitting ducks for COVID-19 and extremely exposed to becoming severely ill, with the possibility of death.”

Detention centres internationally are notorious for their inhuman conditions. Within Australia, more than 1,400 people are held in these immigration prisons and as many as 600 asylum seekers are still languishing in “offshore” facilities.

The reason the “offshore” number is unknown is that the government no longer gives any account of the detainees in Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

The first detention-related case of COVID-19 has been reported in Brisbane, at a hotel in Kangaroo Point that serves as a makeshift prison to house refugees seeking specialist medical treatment. The conditions are cramped and dirty, with bed bugs in the rooms.

On March 18, a security guard employed by Serco, the multinational company contracted by the government to oversee the imprisonment of refugees, tested positive. It is unclear if the guard was working at a separate detention centre at Brisbane airport, but he was last at Kangaroo Point on March 7.

In line with the criminal response by capitalist governments the world over, none of the detainees at Kangaroo Point have been tested for the virus. Even if just one person was infected, it would have spread throughout the detention hotel.

In Melbourne, a detainee was isolated and underwent medical tests after showing signs of COVID-19. He was held in isolation and his room was sterilised and cleaned by staff wearing protective clothing. At Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre, another detainee is being tested, after showing signs of the virus.

Dr Barri Phatarfod, co-founder of Doctors for Refugees, told the media: “Keeping people unnecessarily locked up in close confinement at this time when the rest of the country is being urged to stay in their own four square metres is not only cruel, callous and highly discriminatory, it is potentially exacerbating a public health crisis.”

After the news of the guard in Brisbane was released, a change.org petition was initiated by Human Rights for All, demanding that Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton shut down the facilities and release the families into the community. After reaching 25,000 signatures the petition was increased to a goal of 35,000. It currently sits at more than 30,000 signatures.

Alison Battisson, the owner and director of Human Rights for All, a pro bono law firm dedicated to assisting asylum seekers, wrote that as someone “familiar with how detention centres are run, I am incredibly worried for the health and safety of the people inside these centres, including my youngest client, 2 year old Isabella.”

Battisson is calling for the “release of these innocent people, before COVID-19 spreads through immigration detention centres.” She added: “There is a simple solution to this emerging and potentially life-threatening situation: send these people to homes in Australia.”

On the small Pacific island of Nauru there are still around 200 asylum seekers who have been dumped

there by the Australian government. Nauru is at extreme risk of a severe outbreak of the virus. It is an impoverished country with a population of just over 10,000.

Moreover, the country imports the vast majority of its food, as the transnational phosphate mining companies, overseen by the Australian and New Zealand governments, destroyed the natural environment of Nauru, making the majority of the island unfit for cultivation.

The crisis facing detainees is not just the product of the malign neglect of the Australian government in response to COVID-19. It has been created through decades of punitive and illegal treatment of refugees who fled to Australia from persecution in their countries of origin.

In 1992, the Keating Labor government introduced mandatory detention for all asylum seekers sailing to Australia by boat. This precedent was deepened under the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government. In 2001, it imposed the “Pacific Solution” which forced asylum seekers to former Australian colonies—Nauru or Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

Then in 2012, the Gillard Labor Government reopened the offshore processing camps and vowed that no asylum seeker who arrived by boat would ever be allowed to settle in Australia. The current Coalition government continues that policy.

All refugees and other workers internationally must have the basic democratic right to live and work wherever they chose, regardless of nationality, religion or ethnicity. All the detainees must be released immediately and provided with the highest quality medical care.



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