

# Australian authorities deny medical treatment to detained three-year-old Tamil refugee

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Tharnicaa Murugappan, a three-year-old member of a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee family, imprisoned on Australia's Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, was denied proper medical treatment for ten days, while she had a high fever, vomiting and diarrhoea.

Last Monday night, she was finally medically evacuated from her refugee prison to a children's hospital on the mainland in Perth, the capital of Western Australia. By that stage she had developed septicaemia, a life-threatening blood condition, due to untreated pneumonia.

Her mother Priya was allowed to accompany Tharnicaa to Perth, but her father, Nades, and five-year-old sister Kopika, were forced to remain imprisoned on Christmas Island.

Tharnicaa is the youngest of the Tamil refugee family, who were arrested more than three years ago in their home in the central Queensland town of Biloela. Having been born just prior to her arrest, Tharnicaa has spent most of her life in Australia's inhumane refugee detention system.

There is mass opposition to the family's torturous imprisonment, and to attempts by Scott Morrison's federal Liberal-National government to deport them. Spearheading the call for their release is the community in Biloela, which has been fighting for more than three years through the "Home to Bilo" campaign.

Situated in rural central Queensland, Biloela is a hub for coal mining operations and has a large abattoir that employs a number of immigrants and refugees. The stand taken by the working-class people of this town, as well as the mass support they have received across the country, blows apart the myth of popular support for the criminal war on refugees that has been waged by Labor and Liberal governments alike since the 1990s.

Angela Fredericks, one of the "Home to Bilo"

campaign leaders, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): "My blood was absolutely boiling just listening to the family's treatment by the staff at the detention facility. The medical officers, that are purely there to look after this family at that detention facility, failed in their responsibilities."

Fredericks said Tharnicaa had symptoms for two weeks prior and was seen by medical staff, who simply prescribed her paracetamol and ibuprofen.

For five days before her evacuation, she had consistent high fever, vomiting and diarrhoea. Her temperature was 40.7 degrees Celsius before she was taken to the hospital on Christmas Island.

"On the weekend, [Priya had] been asking for her to be taken to the hospital and she kept getting told no, she's not bad enough, she'll be fine," Fredericks explained. "It wasn't until Tharnicaa was literally falling over that they finally got her to the hospital."

Similar treatment was meted out to Priya in July last year, when she was denied proper medical treatment for a month, including two weeks of severe abdominal pain and vomiting, before being transported to Perth.

The Australian Medical Association Western Australian branch president Andrew Miller is very concerned about the prospect of Tharnicaa being returned to Christmas Island. He stated: "We should be having a long, hard think about whether, in a psychological and social sense, it is safe to discharge her from hospital back to the environment she came from. This was set up to happen by having little children living in an isolated location in lockdown conditions."

The family's lawyer, Carina Ford, told the *Guardian* on Monday that she had forwarded numbers of medical reports to Immigration Minister Alex Hawke, calling for the family's release into community detention. Ford

said the reports “confirm the difficulties that children are now having as a result of long-term detention, which includes sleep disturbance, sensitivity to sound, difficulties sleeping, etc.”

This is consistent with findings by medical professionals on the long-term psychological impact of indefinite detention on children. They can develop what is called “resignation syndrome.” Caused by extreme depression, it can lead victims to withdraw into a catatonic state.

Both Alex Hawke and Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews have refused to release the family, despite having the ministerial authority to do so. Andrews initially appeared to raise the possibility of resettling the family to the US or New Zealand, something never communicated to the family’s lawyers, only to insist, when interviewed on the “Sunrise” television program this morning, that this was not the case.

When asked why the family was being treated in this manner, Andrews said it was in line with “long-standing policies.” She stated: “Quite frankly, I am not going to have people dying trying to come to Australia by sea on my watch... I’m not going to open the gates to the people smugglers.”

This line has been promoted by successive Labor and Liberal governments—barbarous and blatantly illegal treatment of asylum seekers is justified as a means of providing a suitable “deterrent” to other refugees thinking of fleeing to Australia. That rationale has now been extended in defence of the lifelong detention and denial of proper healthcare to a three-year-old child.

The Labor opposition has sought to make a limited appeal to the widespread revulsion over the Murugappan family’s case. Labor’s shadow Home Affairs Minister Kristina Keneally visited the family on Christmas Island in April, and has called for the “sad, sorry saga” to come to an end, and for the government to “allow this family to come home to Biloela.”

This demand is saturated with hypocrisy, and is aimed at covering over the Labor Party’s record in helping create the “border protection” regime that is responsible for the Murugappan family’s indefinite detention.

Keneally herself criticised the Coalition government from the right in 2019, accusing it of “losing control” of the borders, after statistics were released on the number of asylum claims from people arriving in

Australia via airports.

She also condemned then Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton for allowing a temporary break in coordinated Australia-Sri Lanka military patrols targeting Tamil and other refugees. Keneally issued a statement on Twitter: “Mr Dutton needs to explain why he stopped these crucial border patrols.”

Julia Gillard’s Labor government, with the critical backing of the Greens, established the policy of immediate repatriation of all Sri Lankan asylum seekers who reach Australia by boat. Negotiated with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, the agreement saw 700 asylum seekers deported, and an unknown numbers of others blocked by the Australian navy and forced to return.

Labor continues to uphold the entire framework of mandatory detention that it originally developed, and which is aimed at abrogating the internationally-protected right of refugees to seek asylum.

What is happening to Tharnicaa exemplifies the treatment of refugees by the political elites in Australia and internationally. The answer is not to appeal to the very political parties that are responsible for the nightmarish conditions inflicted upon refugees. The orientation of any movement for their freedom must be directed towards the working class, and coupled with the fight for the right of any person to live and work wherever they want in the world.



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