

Australian government dumps two Iranian refugees in the US after nearly nine years of imprisonment

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Two Iranian refugees who have been imprisoned by the Australian government for nearly nine years have been consigned to the United States under a 2016 refugee swap deal.

Adnan Choopani and Mehdi Ali, who are cousins, were 16 and 15 respectively when they were captured by the Australian navy and sent to the notorious immigration prison on Christmas Island, in the Indian Ocean, in 2013.

Now 24 and 25, they will be dumped in the US as part of a brutal resettlement deal struck with the Obama administration, allowing the Australian government to reject all responsibility for their wellbeing. They will be placed in a country that leads the world in COVID cases and deaths—many recorded in immigrant and refugee communities.

Their imprisonment has left significant psychological scars. The conditions they experienced underscore the cruelty of the bipartisan “border protection” regime, in which refugees who arrive to Australia by boat are subjected to indefinite detention.

Both are members of the Ahwazi Arab minority, who face oppression in Iran. They were separately urged by their families to flee the country for their own safety, and did not know the other was fleeing until they met up in Indonesia and boarded the same packed fishing vessel headed for Australia.

After being locked-up on Christmas Island for nine months, Mehdi was deemed to be a child and sent to live with other minors and families. Adnan, just some months older, was assessed as being 10 years above his age, and transferred to the adult male facility.

They were separated for this nine-month period until they were both transferred to the refugee prison camp

on the small Pacific Island nation of Nauru. Adnan’s age was reassessed, and they were placed together in the family camp. Here they were subjected to years of psychological torture.

The Nauru facility is notorious for its squalid conditions and poor treatment of detainees. It has been the subject of a film, international inquiries and lawsuits. It had inadequate medical facilities. Prisoners, including families, were kept in tents that were filled with mold, causing skin irritation and respiratory problems.

In 2016 the *Guardian* published more than 2,000 leaked incident reports, dubbed the Nauru files, which documented officially buried cases of abuse, violence, mistreatment and suicide attempts among over 600 refugees, including 104 children.

The boys’ former teacher, Gabby Sutherland, told Al Jazeera: “The boys were still kept in a cage within the camp.” The cage was used to section off unaccompanied minors from other detainees.

In late 2014, their refugee status was formally recognised, but this did not change their situation. The Rudd Labor government in 2013 had declared that all asylum seekers who reached Australia by boat would never be allowed to settle in Australia.

In October 2014, 29 unaccompanied minors were removed from detention and placed in accommodation on the island. This granted little freedom and created great risk for the young men.

Nauru has been ravaged by major corporations for decades for its phosphate deposits. It now resembles a moon, with craters everywhere. Very little grows on the island. Most food must be imported and is highly processed.

This has created an obesity epidemic, along with high unemployment, fuelling discontent in the tiny country, with a population of just below 11,000. To divert this anger, the government has blamed the detainees for the poor social conditions. The young minors bore the brunt of this redirected anger.

Four boys were beaten and robbed in the first month alone, and threatening letters were sent to others. Adnan sewed his lips together in protest and sat outside the settlement services building. Mehdi joined him in solidarity. They were arrested, stripped naked and thrown in a prison cell where they were beaten, abused and spat on, although neither was ever charged.

They also watched their friends in the camp succumb to the torturous conditions. One of their friends burned himself to death, which led to them attempting suicide themselves.

In 2019 they were brought to Australia under a medevac bill. The legislation, later repealed, allowed doctors to recommend the transfer of asylum seekers to Australia. This did little to alleviate the suffering, as they were moved between detention centres and guarded hotel rooms.

Mehdi told the *Guardian*: “It’s been a complete trauma... We came as children, we were boys, and we never had a childhood, we were just put in a cage. We did not receive a proper education, we were never allowed to have fun, we just had to try to survive in these harsh circumstances.”

Adnan told the newspaper: “Every day is still uncertain, that is the way they punish us. Every day we struggle to survive. They are going to leave us almost a decade with no update, no date of release, no charges, no nothing, it’s completely mental torture.”

Mehdi spent his last birthday in detention sharing a hotel with the tennis star Novak Djokovic, who was detained there before being deported. Djokovic, a promoter of the anti-vaccine movement, broke COVID-19 rules when entering Australia. However, his treatment highlighted the plight of the asylum seekers imprisoned in the hotels.

With their consignment to the US, the future of the two young men is uncertain. And there are still hundreds of other refugees imprisoned or abandoned by the Australian government in countries such as Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

The entire Australian ruling elite is responsible for

the inhuman treatment of refugees. The precedent was set by the Keating Labor government in the 1990s, which initiated the mandatory detention of all refugees who arrived by boat. Subsequent Coalition and Labor governments deepened this policy by introducing offshore detention on remote islands.

The Greens, who posture as refugee advocates, formed a minority government with Labor from 2010 to 2013 as it reopened the offshore camps and banned all asylum seekers who arrive by boat from ever settling in Australia, setting a policy that continues today. Such policies pioneered the pitiless treatment of refugees in the US, the UK and across Europe.



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