

Refugees expelled from Australia face hunger and violence in Nauru

Mike Head
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Two reports have shed further rare light on the inhuman conditions being suffered on the remote impoverished Pacific island of Nauru by asylum seekers and immigration deportees consigned there for indefinite detention by the Australian government.

Under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who once postured cynically as a defender of refugee rights to head off widespread disgust with offshore detention, the Labor government is enforcing one of the most barbaric regimes in the world.

The first report, published yesterday by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), is based on interviews conducted with 78 refugees whose boats were intercepted militarily before they were forcibly transported to Nauru.

The results provide a glimpse of their plight, which has been largely hidden from public view because most journalists are banned from entering the tiny island state, a former British, Australian and New Zealand colony.

Among the interviewees, 99 percent could not buy enough food with their meagre allowances and described routinely exhausting their fortnightly payments, leading to missed meals and periods of hunger. Two-thirds, or 68 percent, rarely or never had access to fresh fruit, vegetables and meat, and 82 percent had no easy access to free, clean drinking water.

This dangerously inadequate food access is driven by limited financial support (just \$A260 a fortnight) and the high cost of living on the island, whose residents rely on expensive food imports for 98 percent of their supplies after decades of colonial-era phosphate mining destroyed much of the native vegetation.

One asylum seeker commented: “I’m not even eating a quarter of what I ate before coming to Nauru. I cannot afford fruit or vegetables. I just eat pulses and rice. I skip meals frequently in the second week of my pay cycle. I’ve lost 15kg since arriving on Nauru. People tell me that I have lost weight. My clothes are much looser now than they were on arrival. I feel weak and tired from the lack of food.”

The \$260 fortnightly allowance, which the Nauru government says is the average wage for the island’s workers, must cover all essentials, including phone credit and internet access, which costs about \$100 a month.

The Albanese government flatly defends this punitive

destitution. The Home Affairs Department said the payment was “designed to promote self-sufficiency” and was reviewed regularly “to ensure it remains fit for purpose.”

Alongside the interviews, the ASRC conducted an updated audit of client files and medical records. The data showed a further deterioration of people’s health, with 93 percent involving physical health issues, including coronary issues, tumours, lung infections and unmanaged diabetes, and 95 percent reporting mental health concerns, including suicidality, severe depression/anxiety and panic attacks.

According to the ASRC report, the medical facilities in Nauru have very limited capacity to manage complex health issues. For example, there is delayed access to specialist assessment and treatment, limited and delayed dental care, no inpatient psychiatric care facility, no MRI equipment for emergency diagnosis, no air ambulance, inadequate mental health support, issues with access to medications, and no experienced specialist torture and trauma counselling provider.

As of May 31, 101 asylum seekers were stuck in Nauru. Of these, 10 were held in closed, prison-like detention in Regional Processing Centre 1 (RPC-1). Once released from RPC-1, they are transferred to RPC-3 or hostel-style accommodation, where approximately 91 people currently reside.

Most are young to middle-aged men from south and east Asia. They are arbitrarily and indefinitely held, with no information provided about timelines or processes. Some individuals have been recognised as refugees, yet no resettlement pathways are available to them.

Under Labor’s laws, none will be able to come to Australia even if determined to be genuine refugees. With the New Zealand and US arrangements closed, they are trapped in indefinite limbo.

Nauru has only about 12,000 to 13,000 residents. By the time it was granted nominal independence in 1968, aggressive strip-mining had left about 80 percent of the 21-square-kilometre island an uninhabitable wasteland.

Perishable produce generally arrives by air on a weekly flight, and limited supply means that some items sell quickly and are often prohibitively expensive. Staple items such as flour and UHT milk are generally delivered by ship and may be unavailable for extended periods. Frozen vegetables are also

affected by supply disruptions and periodic shortages.

Regular power outages at refugee accommodation also interrupt refrigeration, spoiling the limited food people have been able to purchase.

Access to safe drinking water remains scarce. The island has no rivers or freshwater lakes. People must drink unclean water from taps, or boil and cool unsafe water from unsealed tanks.

These primitive conditions are creating social tensions. The ASRC said it recently received reports of refugees experiencing at least 21 incidents of physical assault, 31 incidents of verbal abuse, 23 incidents of theft and 6 reports of being assaulted while they are fishing.

In another report, based on whistleblower claims that were tabled in the Australian parliament in June, violent threats also come from community monitoring officers (CMOs), tasked with policing the people dumped in Nauru.

Under laws introduced by Nauru's government in March, CMOs were given powers to restrain, search, and monitor Australian transferees, including the use of "reasonable force." Failure to comply with instructions by the CMOs risks an imprisonment term of up to two years.

Last month, these laws were amended to extend those powers to be used against all residents of Nauru. That seems to be a bid, instigated by the Australian government, to stymie court challenges by ex-immigration detainees who face being deported to Nauru. Legal arguments have been mounted that the detainees' selective exposure to CMO powers amounted to unconstitutional punishment.

In addition to consigning refugees to Nauru, the Labor government is trying to remove to Nauru about 350 people whom it had been forced to release from immigration detention facilities in November 2023 as the result of a High Court case known as NZYQ, which ruled indefinite detention to be unconstitutional punishment.

To help Labor evade the NZYQ ruling, Nauru's government agreed to place them on 30-year visas in return for an upfront payment exceeding \$400 million, plus \$70 million a year. The exact terms of this Memorandum of Understanding remain secret.

Holders of these visas have no right to family reunification. More than a third of the NZYQ ex-detainees, 131 individuals, have Australian children, and 63 have an Australian spouse or partner, according to data obtained under freedom of information laws. They face being separated for life.

As of June 4, 12 people had been issued Nauruan visas and deported there, including an individual reliant on a wheelchair. A further 37 people reportedly have been re-detained for deportation to Nauru, with another nine issued visas but not yet detained.

Offshore detention is policed by private contractors such as Management and Training Corporation (MTC), a US prison operator. In 2025, the Albanese government expanded MTC's Nauru detention contract to approximately \$790 million.

Since the previous Labor government of Julia Gillard reintroduced offshore detention in 2012, it has cost \$14.35 billion, including nearly \$1 billion in 2025–26. That is a measure of the determination of Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition, to deny basic democratic and civil rights to refugees.

In 1992, the Keating Labor government was the first to impose mandatory detention of asylum seekers. That paved the way for the Howard Coalition government to introduce offshore detention in 2001, which Labor also backed, creating an Australian "model" that other capitalist governments have since emulated.

The Albanese government recommenced imprisonment in Nauru in 2023 despite years of reports documenting physical and mental ill-health, self-harm and neglect during the previous two decades of this "Pacific solution."

Albanese's government is now going further, matching regimes implemented by governments across Europe and internationally, spearheaded by the Trump administration's fascistic Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, killings, detentions and mass deportations.

On every continent, the media and political establishments are seeking to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment and nationalism to divide the working class and divert discontent away from the staggering accumulation of wealth by the billionaires and the underlying capitalist profit system itself.

Amid an ongoing cost-of-living and housing crisis, and facing growing working-class disaffection, Labor is trying to scapegoat refugees, immigrants and international students for the deteriorating social conditions, echoing the far-right anti-immigrant One Nation.

To answer this toxic offensive, workers and young people must defend the basic democratic right of people to live and work anywhere, with full social and citizenship rights. This is part of the fight for a global movement of the working class to reorganise society on a socialist basis, for human and social need, not corporate profit.



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