

Australian immigration detainees launch hunger strike

By Mike Head
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About 60 prisoners at one of Australia's notorious immigration detention centres launched a hunger strike on March 28 to protest against a new wave of refugee deportations, including the removal to China of a 35-year-old female member of the Falun Gong sect. As of yesterday, 25 detainees were continuing the fast into its second week.

Despite receiving almost no coverage in the mainstream media, the protest at Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre—the scene of scores of previous hunger strikes—once again serves to highlight the inhumanity of the Howard government's mandatory detention of all asylum seekers.

Refugee activists said the Chinese woman was wanted by police in her home country for defending Falun Gong practitioners and attempting to expose their persecution. She screamed, awaking the other inmates, as at least six guards dragged her from the detention centre in her pyjamas at 4 a.m. on March 28.

The guards, employed by Global Solutions Ltd, the private company that runs the centre, were acting under the instructions of the immigration department, following the failure of two previous efforts to deport the woman. The government flouted an agreement it had made with detainees to give 48 hours' notice of any removal.

That same night, on March 28, a Tanzanian asylum seeker was taken to hospital after slashing himself with broken glass. His condition and whereabouts remain unknown.

The hunger strikers have raised three demands: an end to forcible removals, the abolition of mandatory detention, and reports from the government on the fate of previously deported refugees, numbers of whom are known to have been killed or imprisoned on their return.

A spokeswoman for Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews has contemptuously denied any knowledge of the action. She confirmed that the woman had been placed on a flight to China, and claimed that the detention centre was calm after a "bit of noise".

Two weeks before the Chinese woman's removal, two other detainees were deported: a Nepalese man, locked in

Villawood for three years, and a Filipino woman. Earlier in February, six people were deported from Villawood, including three Chinese asylum seekers.

On March 27, the day before the hunger strike began, up to 40 detainees protested about another Chinese national, An Xiang Tao, being confined in an isolation cell. An was isolated after being taken to hospital with head wounds that he apparently inflicted on himself when detainees were told that he was being removed to China.

An, also a Falun Gong practitioner, arrived in Australia in 2000 and had been in detention for four years before his deportation was ordered by the Federal Court earlier this year. About 100 Villawood detainees of many different nationalities formed a human blockade to prevent that taking place in late February.

The government's forced removals are blatant violations of basic democratic rights, as well as international refugee law. It is well known that Chinese deportees face religious and political persecution in China. The Chinese government banned the Falun Gong spiritual group in 1999 and has subjected its supporters to imprisonment and various forms of repression.

An and eight other asylum seekers have taken a case to the Australian government's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) for human rights transgressions and racial discrimination in Villawood. The action was brought after a number of Chinese officials visited the country in 2005, and were permitted to question 24 Villawood detainees.

The interrogations gave An and other Chinese detainees even further reason to fear retribution from Beijing. An's lawyer, Michaela Byers, told the media: "He fears that they will detain him on arrival, and that he may match someone on a data base who needs an organ transplant." A report published last year, based on investigations undertaken by a former Canadian cabinet minister, accused Chinese authorities of killing Falun Gong practitioners and selling body parts to foreigners.

The conditions faced by the detainees in Villawood are

nothing short of barbaric.

In October 2005, six Chinese asylum seekers held a hunger strike at Villawood for up to 55 days to protest against mandatory detention and their conditions. The protest exposed the fact that nothing had improved inside the detention centres despite cynical efforts by the Howard government to placate growing public disgust at the systematic mistreatment of asylum seekers and other so-called “illegal immigrants”.

Last November, over a hundred Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese detainees staged a 48-hour hunger strike in protest against the poor and punitive conditions, and the length of their detention. Some had been locked up for more than four years and separated from their families. Senator Amanda Vanstone, immigration minister at the time, provocatively accused the prisoners of trying to “blackmail” the government.

Detainees complained to journalists of being detained for working without permission, and then being made to work at a rate of a dollar an hour, in order to buy phone cards or cigarettes. They said the food was awful, poor in nutrition, taste and variety, despite years of complaints. They also reported that almost all detainees were being dosed with psychiatric medication.

In the same month, an inquiry on behalf of the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work into detention conditions was told by Professor Chris Goddard, director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University, that “detention centres generated universal mental ill-health never seen outside a psychiatric hospital”. The co-convenor of the inquiry, Professor Linda Briskman from Curtin University, said the inquiry had been told of at least 10 people who had died in detention since 1999.

Last December, Sharif Assad, a Syrian detainee was tied to a bed in Bankstown hospital, not far from the detention centre, for six days after suffering an epileptic seizure. An independent psychologist from the Transcultural Mental Health Services who visited Assad last year recommended his release as the only way to stop his mental health deteriorating. But the Howard government rejected the recommendation.

In mid-2005, the well-publicised cases of two Australian residents, Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez, who both suffered physical and mental abuse in detention after being wrongly locked up as “illegals”, eventually forced the government to make a deal with a group of its own backbenchers to modify the detention policy. Children and their mothers were permitted to apply for transfers to “community detention”.

This so-called compromise allowed the detention system

to continue. As at March 16 this year, 617 people remained imprisoned, including 67 women and children in community detention, more than half of whom had sought refugee protection visas. Of these, 234 were in Villawood, and 82 on the Australian offshore territory of Christmas Island.

Since then, 82 Tamil refugees on Christmas Island have been transported to the remote Pacific island of Nauru. This meant re-opening the Australian-financed detention camp there, just weeks after the final departure of the last two of the hundreds of boat refugees incarcerated since 2001.

Andrews has also signalled a ramping up of the so-called “Pacific Solution” by opening negotiations with Indonesia for it to imprison all refugee boat arrivals and accept the immediate return of any that make it to Australia. The Indonesian government is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and therefore has no formal legal impediment to sending asylum seekers straight back to suffer persecution in the countries they fled.

These developments, combined with the spate of deportations from Villawood, indicate that the Howard government and new immigration minister Andrews are once again ramping up the vilification and scapegoating of refugees in the lead up to a federal election.

In this, as in the infamous 2001 federal election campaign, Howard relies on the complicity of the Labor Party, which is equally wedded to the mandatory detention regime, instigated by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the early 1990s. Labor’s immigration spokesman Tony Burke has not uttered a word about the Villawood hunger strike.

In fact, Burke’s last media comment on the Villawood detention centre came during a January 15 press conference, during which he opposed government plans to shut down and relocate the facility. Typically, Burke sought to outdo the government’s scare campaign against asylum seekers by declaring that western Sydney residents feared a new detention centre being placed “in their backyard”.

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