

Australia: Refugees continue hunger strike as frustration and anger escalate

By Mike Head
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Despite repeated efforts by the Gillard government and the immigration department to downplay its extent, reports have surfaced that about 230 asylum seekers have joined a hunger strike that began last Tuesday inside the detention camp on Christmas Island, a remote Indian Ocean territory. An Iraqi Kurd, a man in his 30s, allegedly attempted to commit suicide last weekend. Another 10 detainees have sewn their lips together since the weekend, taking the total to around 20.

An immigration department spokesman yesterday refused to confirm the number of detainees taking part in the lip-sewing protest but said that the number of self-harm incidents had increased since the 10 cases reported on Friday.

The protest started in honour of Ahmad al-Akabi, a 41-year-old Iraqi school teacher and father of three, who hung himself in a toilet block at Sydney's Villawood detention centre early last Tuesday morning. For several days last week, the government suppressed all reports of the Christmas Island hunger strike, which includes Iranian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Algerian and Palestinian refugees.

The hunger strikers, some of whom have been incarcerated for a year, are protesting the inhumane delays in the processing of their claims for protection visas, and the Labor government's high rejection rate of their applications. They are demanding that representatives of human rights organisations, or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), visit them and take responsibility for their cases.

The hunger strike is the latest sign that anger and frustration is mounting among the almost 6,000 detainees now crammed into Australia's over-crowded facilities. Of those, 2,971 are on Christmas Island, including families with young children. Others are

scattered across the country, some in capital cities, others in remote military facilities on the far north-west coast, in the West Australian goldfields, at Cape York and Port Augusta. The lip-stitching follows a mass breakout of detainees in Darwin, two suicides at Villawood, rooftop protests, fires and an increase in self-harm among detainees, including children. In Melbourne, a shortage of computers sparked a fight among 50 Afghan teenagers at the Broadmeadows Immigration Transit Accommodation centre.

Many such protests occurred under the former Howard Liberal government between 1999 and 2005, when refugees were detained for up to five years in remote camps, including on the Pacific island of Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. In 2002, hundreds of asylum seekers detained in a semi-desert facility at Woomera in South Australia sewed their lips together in protest against their indefinite detention, as part of a two-week hunger strike that spread to other camps, including the Curtin and Port Hedland air base in Australia's far north-west, Villawood and Maribyrnong in Melbourne.

The Gillard government's immigration minister, Chris Bowen, has inflamed the situation by flatly declaring that the government expects many more similar protests since it has increased the rejection rate of asylum claims, including from Afghanistan. Interviewed on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio's "PM" program last Friday, he provocatively declared: "[W]e should expect this sort of frustration and tension where we have high rejection rates, higher than previously have been experienced by people who are claiming asylum."

In another interview, on Sydney radio 2UE, Bowen revealed that nearly 1,200 asylum seekers currently in detention, mainly from Afghanistan, had been rejected,

including 150 who had unsuccessfully appealed via the government's internal Refugee Status Assessment process. Bowen effectively blamed the refugees for their own prolonged detention. "When you find rejection rates growing at about 50 percent, that then means that people are in detention longer as it takes longer to return them to Afghanistan unless they're willing to go back," he said.

As well as boasting of the government's higher rejection rates, Bowen has reiterated that such protests would not change the outcome of a single protection visa application. Speaking at an earlier doorstep interview, he added that the protest would not lead to "speeding up the processing of refugee applications because they are done vigorously and rigorously". Bowen emphasised: "It certainly won't have any of those outcomes, if that's what the desired outcome is."

Bowen's comments drew a disgusted response from the chairperson of the government's advisory group on the mental health of asylum seekers, the psychiatrist Louise Newman. "Implicit in his statement is that we should accept this," Dr Newman told journalists. "We should accept—for the greater political good—that this degree of human suffering is acceptable." She said she had warned for months that conditions of overcrowding, stress and uncertainty could cause a repeat of the kind of protests staged under the Howard government. "This is not an isolated incident. This is something that is systemic," she said.

Speaking on ABC radio, Newman declared: "Clearly it's a fairly desperate act and it has clear symbolic value. It's really saying that people feel they have no voice, they feel powerless, they feel isolated and I think it's a fairly graphic way of expressing the dilemmas these people find themselves in." Newman called on the government to reconsider mandatory detention.

The truth is, like its Liberal predecessor, the Labor government is enforcing a deliberately punitive regime, designed to deter people from fleeing persecution. These practices directly violate the international Refugee Convention, which prohibits punishment of, or discrimination against, refugees.

This morning, Bowen indicated on ABC radio that the government is still considering means of overcoming the effect of this month's High Court decision, which ruled invalid some aspects of the government's Refugee Status Assessment system. That

system bars asylum seekers from exercising the basic right to challenge refusals of protection visas in the courts, a right also enshrined in the Refugee Convention. In the interim, while it prepares its legal measures, the government has informed rejected asylum seekers that they can seek a fresh internal review—a process that will only prolong their detention, worsening the distress and fuelling the protests inside the increasingly over-stretched facilities.

Bowen reiterated that he retains a discretion to not even consider a refugee application, or to reject it "in the public interest," regardless of the outcome of the revised procedures. Even if detainees ultimately seek review of Bowen's decisions by the courts, the Labor government is certain to fight them, potentially all the way to the High Court, just as the Howard government did.

The author also recommends:

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