

Another suicide in Australian immigration prison camp

By Max Newman
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On June 15, Fariborz Karami, a 26-year-old Kurdish Iranian refugee, took his own life inside his tent in the Australian detention facility on Nauru. His death is the direct result of the “border protection” regime, maintained by successive Australian governments, of turning away all refugee boats and detaining asylum seekers indefinitely on remote Pacific islands.

Karami’s is the twelfth preventable death since the previous Australian Labor government reopened the prison camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island in 2012, where refugees remain incarcerated under the Liberal-National government.

Karami had been imprisoned on Nauru for five years with his mother, Fazileh Mansour Beigi, and Ali, his 12-year-old brother. A popular individual amongst other detainees and described as gregarious and caring, he had married a short time before his death.

In the months leading up to his death, however, he had begun to withdraw under the weight of a hopeless situation. This was made worse when the Turnbull government cancelled, at the last minute, a medical transfer to Taiwan for his mother.

Two days before his death, Karami’s mother made a final appeal, begging for help for herself and her sons. She wrote to Canstruct International, a Brisbane-based company contracted by the Australian government to oversee and run the Nauru facility.

Beigi described the horrors she and her children have experienced in Nauru. “It’s close to five years that we are living in a dark tent which is filled with mould and germs,” she wrote. “My kids have developed skin problems. Due to the repetitive darkness of this life, my kids are depressed. I also am emotionally and physically in a fatal stage of my life. Many times, I have asked for your help, but, instead of assisting me, each time you have wounded me more.”

Beigi detailed the concerns she has for her youngest son, who was feeling suffocated and exhausted. She recalled how she had previously asked for permission to move him to a better tent. “Again, you have not answered me,” she wrote. “You have not taken my request seriously. If my kids and myself get worse, you will be responsible.”

Twelve-year-old Ali, also made an appeal for his brother and mother through a video broadcast, saying he felt “helpless” and “there is no one to see how we are suffering. My mother is very sick and my brother is totally depressed.” Since his brother’s death, Ali has been placed “into care” by the camp authorities.

Karami had a history of being tortured and had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. As a 10-year-old, he had been kidnapped and threatened with execution in Iran. He was reportedly plagued by nightmares and battled with depression for years. His indefinite incarceration, lack of appropriate medical facilities and inability to help his family dramatically worsened his condition.

Beigi’s letter was one of a series of pleas over many months. On March 18, she begged, as she had done previously, for medical assistance for herself and her children. She said they were getting “sicker every day,” but she had received the same answer “in August, in December, in February, in March.” She wrote: “Each time you repeat that if I can’t put up with this circumstance, I should return to my country.”

Again, on April 10, Beigi wrote: “So far, with all the misery, in any way we could, we tolerated our situation and we trusted you. We were sure that you will shelter us. But it has become the opposite. Little by little we die.” She concluded: “After five years, my children’s situation and their environment need to change. They need to have a normal life. Please don’t make my

children even sicker. In anguish, I beg you to help.”

These letters build a picture of the human suffering brought on by the deliberately punitive regime enforced by Liberal-National and Labor governments alike. Desperate and vulnerable people, fleeing persecution and wars, are subjected to inhuman conditions as a means of deterring other refugees from seeking asylum.

The detainees on Nauru, who include children and babies, live in tents covered in black mould. Most of the tents are not air-conditioned and there is no access to running water inside the marquees. In a climate, close to the equator, which former employees describe as “intense” and “persistent,” detainees get little respite from the intense heat.

A leaked cache of documents in 2016 revealed over 2,000 officially suppressed incident reports of detainees, many involving children, being beaten, humiliated and sexually assaulted. There were hundreds of incident reports of children attempting to end their own lives.

This cruel regime has pioneered the barbaric treatment currently being meted out to refugees and their families by governments across Europe, northern Africa and the US. Australia’s “Pacific Solution” is akin to the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” policy, in which children have been ripped away from their parents and subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and in which families are now to be interned in military bases.

Australia’s “border protection” program has its origins in the “mandatory detention” policy introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992. Under Labor, Australia set a global precedent that involved the indefinite imprisonment, without trial or any judicial process, of all asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat.

Since then, tens of thousands of people have been incarcerated, often for years, until their refugee claims were “processed,” and often rejected, by officials and intelligence officers, acting under increasingly draconian legislation to disqualify asylum seekers and block ultimate appeals to courts.

This reactionary program was first announced by the so-called “Labor Left” Immigration Minister Gerry Hand in parliament on May 5, 1992. Hand characterised the now 26-year-old policy as an “interim” measure, stating: “I believe it is crucial that

all persons who come to Australia without prior authorisation not be released into the community.

“Their release would undermine the government’s strategy for determining their refugee status or entry claims... The government is determined that a clear signal be sent that migration to Australia may not be achieved by simply arriving in this country and expecting to be allowed into the community.”

One government after another, including the Greens-backed minority Labor government of 2010–13, has repeated this argument to try to justify the torturous imprisonment of refugees, many fleeing the horrors of imperialist wars and regime-change operations globally by the US and its allies, including Australia. Karami’s death is another indictment of this criminal policy.

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