

Australian government persecutes refugees, including on remote Nauru

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The Australian Labor government is intensifying its anti-refugee regime, in line with draconian measures by governments globally to demonise people fleeing war, persecution and impoverishment—making them scapegoats for worsening domestic social conditions.

Most notoriously, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government last year reopened the Australian-financed detention camp on the tiny, remote Pacific island of Nauru. It has since rapidly expanded the number of refugees held there, under appalling and punitive conditions.

From the facility being vacant in June 2023, a new Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) report says there are now 96 people detained there, up from 15 in February, with many suffering physical and mental ill-health.

One Nauru detainee, Mohammad Anjum, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in a phone call: “They are treating us like animals, like criminals... When we ask them how long we will stay here, how long we will go outside, what is our future—no one is saying this.”

In its [health report](#) released last week, the ASRC said that of the 64 people on Nauru it is currently in contact with, 65 percent had reported physical health conditions and 22 percent had severe mental health conditions.

The report, titled *Cruelty by Design: The health crisis in offshore detention*, also documented the health problems experienced by 47 refugees formerly detained in a similar facility on Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) equally remote Manus Island, who remain stranded in PNG.

Of the people with whom the ASRC is in contact, 60 percent of the Nauru detainees reported concerns with the limited healthcare available on the island, which lacks the medical resources to meet the needs of its own 12,500 people.

In addition, 40 percent of the refugees in PNG suffered chronic suicidal ideation and a history of suicide attempts; and 10 percent of people held in Nauru experienced suicidal ideation. Further, 100 percent of people detained in Nauru and in PNG reported experiences of trauma (including persecution, the journey to seek asylum by sea, family separation, medical trauma, experiences of violence in detention).

As a result, 20 percent of refugees in PNG are so unwell that their lives are at imminent risk, and 100 percent of them

reported difficulty accessing medical care, including being declined care, and being asked to pay for care when they have no financial support.

In keeping with successive governments’ history of secrecy surrounding the welfare and future of people detained offshore, those in Nauru have had their smartphones removed, preventing them contacting their families. Humanitarian websites are also blocked on shared computers and detainees are only given limited phone credit to make outgoing calls.

The *Cruelty by Design* report stated: “Medical experts, including those who witnessed firsthand the destructive effects of detention in Manus and Nauru, have continued to speak up about the deliberate secrecy surrounding people’s welfare and conditions, difficulties in escalating medical care, lack of appropriate access to basic medications and treatment, and minimal emergency medical training of local health staff.

“Coronial inquests into deaths in offshore detention have also confirmed that lack of early intervention and significant delays in medical evacuation led to the deterioration of treatable conditions and ultimately to loss of life.”

In a medical foreword to the report, Dr Nilanthy Vigneswaran, an infectious diseases fellow, wrote: “Since the reintroduction of offshore processing for those seeking asylum in Australia in 2013, the facilities in Nauru and PNG have garnered international infamy as sites of human rights abuses. Multiple, preventable deaths have occurred in these settings, from treatable conditions.

“Healthcare workers in the employ of contracted companies tasked with medical oversight of these facilities have blown the whistle on disastrous, inhumane living conditions, and have described them as akin to ‘torture.’ Inadequate provision of care and unacceptable delays in escalation of care in offshore detention have contributed to morbidity and mortality.

“Overcrowding, lack of sanitation or appropriate standards of hygiene, and accounts of sexual and physical assault have been documented and are only the tip of the iceberg regarding the endemic medical issues in offshore detention. Moreover, indefinite and mandatory immigration detention has been cited by human rights organisations and the United Nations as a method of torture and degrading treatment. The fact that children have been subject to this treatment, is an unimaginable

and cruel reality.”

Labor’s resumption of the brutal “Pacific Solution” imposed by previous Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments since 2001, is being accompanied by growing numbers of refugee boat “turnbacks,” conducted behind a wall of military secrecy.

Militarised Australian Border Force units are forcing refugees to undertake dangerous journeys back to Indonesian islands, supplied with barely enough food and fuel to make the voyage.

According to Australian Border Force statistics, between 1 May 2022, just before Labor took office, and 30 March 2024, 12 boats with a total of 247 people on board were intercepted and their passengers were either sent to Nauru or returned to their departure point.

These figures are already out of date. On July 10, the Indonesian National Police reported that Australian forces sent back 44 asylum seekers to the remote southern island of Rote after intercepting their two boats at sea.

The Rote Island police chief said the people had been forced to board an aluminium boat after an Australian vessel intercepted their wooden craft. He said they claimed to have spent three days at sea before being intercepted.

This is at least the second time this has happened in recent months. In June, Indonesian immigration authorities reported they had detained 28 foreigners stranded on a southern Java beach who said they had been set adrift after Australian authorities intercepted them.

As well as their lives being endangered, these people were thus stripped of their rights, under international law, to apply for protected refugee status.

Refugee Council of Australia figures show that more than 70 percent of the 3,129 people detained on Manus Island and Nauru since 2013, when the Rudd Labor government declared the policy of denying residency to all refugees arriving by boat, were later ruled to be owed refugee protection.

In response to the latest revelations, the Albanese government again boasted that it had outdone the previous Coalition government in funding Operation Sovereign Borders, which the Coalition government introduced in 2013 under the slogan, “Stop the Boats.”

Labor Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil said funding for the operation’s air and sea patrols had never been higher. “If you attempt an illegal boat journey to Australia you will either be turned back or sent to Nauru,” she said.

Despite widespread opposition throughout working-class immigrant communities, the Albanese government is also still attempting to get through parliament a far-reaching immigration deportation bill. It includes the power to repeatedly imprison people for up to five years for refusing to sign documents facilitating their deportation and that of their children.

That would clear the way for the government to detain and

forcibly deport up to 10,000 people currently living in the community on bridging visas. The bill would also give the government the power to impose blanket travel bans, barring entry visas to people from designated “removal concern countries,” such as Iran, China, Russia and South Sudan.

Earlier this year, Labor joined the Coalition in ramming through parliament laws to impose ankle bracelets, curfews and other police-state restrictions on detainees released by a High Court ruling, or to re-imprison them via “preventative detention” provisions.

This was accompanied by bipartisan and media scaremongering, demonising the detainees as murderers and rapists. Many are traumatised refugees and all have served any prison sentences they received for earlier convictions.

Since the 1990s, successive Australian governments have set precedents for other Western governments to shut their doors, block boats, detain asylum seekers and either return them or transport them to grim locations.

Now “foreigners,” including international students, are being blamed for the deteriorating social conditions being produced by capitalism’s economic and cost-of-living crisis and the channelling of billions of dollars into military spending amid the US-backed Gaza genocide and the plunge into wider war against Russia and China.

The same governments, including Australia’s, whose wars and regime-change operations have caused millions of people to flee from the Middle East, Ukraine and other regions, are leading the closure of borders.

This is a vicious drive to divide working people, domestically and globally.

In the US, while Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump vows to launch the biggest mass deportations ever seen, the Biden administration is intensifying its barbaric measures to prevent refugees entering the country. The UK Labour government of Keir Starmer has escalated a similar attack. On World Refugee Day, German governments discussed measures to increase deportations.



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