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Canberra holds firm on handling of detainees

Don't like it, 'go home': Refugee claimants sew lips together, swallow shampoo

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National Post

Afghan refugee claimants at a camp in the remote Australian outback have sewn their mouths shut and swallowed shampoo in the latest and most macabre gesture of protest about their detention.

Sixty-four Afghan detainees, including several teenagers, sewed their lips together, using needles given to them for craft classes and to mend clothing, apparently frustrated about the time taken to process their visa applications. More than two dozen detainees are being treated for dehydration at the arid desert camp, where temperatures soar to 32C. And this week six people, including two minors, were treated for self-inflicted injuries and seven for swallowing detergent and shampoo after finding out their visa applications had been rejected.

In a letter smuggled out of Woomera camp and published in The Sydney Morning Herald, the detainees wrote: "We have no hope. We see no future. We only request the Australian people help us, otherwise we have no choice but to continue the hunger strike until the end of our life."

The self-mutilation and hunger strike of 200 detainees is only the latest form of protest at Woomera, a former missile testing site that houses 834 refugee claimants, including 244 Afghans. Last month, immigration officials used water cannons to break up rioting detainees who rampaged for three days, lighting fires and throwing rocks, injuring 21 staff. The camp is the most isolated of the country's six detention centres, located 475 km north of Adelaide.

The Australian government, however, is not swayed by these dramatic gestures -- and it appears most Australians aren't either. Last summer, the Australian government froze asylum applications from Afghans due to the fluid political situation in that country and began turning away all illegal migrants who attempted to enter the country by boat. All undocumented refugee claimants are now ferried to Pacific islands that have agreed to house them while their refugee applications are being processed.

These tough policies, which both the government and the main opposition party support, helped secure a third term for John Howard, the Prime Minister, who was re-elected last November. Yesterday, Philip Ruddock, the Immigration Minister, said the hunger strikers would not influence the government's approach, and that they could "go home" if they didn't like the conditions at the detention centres, built behind steel and barbed-wire fences.

"Such behaviour will in no way influence the granting of asylum in Australia or change the due process of the law being followed in the refugee visa application system," an immigration department spokesperson told the National Post.

However, Amnesty International and other human rights groups believe automatically detaining

unaccompanied minors and children for months, or even years, violates international law. This week, a senior advisor on immigration resigned from Mr. Howard's government in protest, saying the immigration policy was tearing apart Australia's multi-cultural fabric.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia has signed, stipulates that children should be detained only as a last resort and for the shortest possible period, points out Alex Neve, Secretary General for Amnesty International in Canada.

"For children to be taking desperate steps such as this is a clear indication of the need to re-examine the policy," he said, referring to the teenagers who sewed their lips together.

The UN's human rights committee has also ruled the decision to detain asylum claimants should not be automatic, but based on a case-by-case assessment, he added.

In Canada, refugee claimants are detained only if they are considered a flight risk or a threat to public safety. This policy, however, has been criticized by some as too lax; some refugees who are released go underground and abandon their claims. For example, of the 599 Fukianese who washed up on the shores of British Columbia in the summer of 1999 on four rusty freighters, 151 filed refugee claims and then disappeared.

Sergio Karas, a Toronto immigration lawyer, believes detaining undocumented migrants is an acceptable practice, as long as it is done in a humane way and claimants are not languishing for months or years while their cases are held up in the system.

"Australia has a duty to process these people quickly and if they are deportable to do so," he said.

In the past, the Australian government has granted temporary "safe haven visas" to Kosovars and East Timorese who were allowed to stay for short periods until the political situation in their homelands stabilized.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has said it is too early to send Afghan asylum seekers home, although Australian government officials have indicated that fleeing a civil war or land mines is not necessarily a "legitimate claim of persecution." Most detainees have been in Woomera for at least five months.

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