

Labor for Refugees



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MEDIA RELEASE

11 November 2015

LABOR FOR REFUGEES CALLS ON THE GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION TO CLOSE THE CHRISTMAS ISLAND DETENTION CENTRE AS WELL AS THE DETENTION CENTRES ON NAURU AND MANUS ISLAND

The toll on asylum seekers' mental health and wellbeing as a result of being in prolonged detention has been well documented by numerous reports. The recent tragic death of Fazal Chegeni, an Iranian Failli Kurd, while in detention on Christmas Island is just one dire example of this human catastrophe. As noted by the Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network (JSCAIDN), the length of time spent in an 'information vacuum' in immigration detention is a major contributor to stress.(1) This parliamentary committee also highlighted that remoteness affects the quality of psychiatric care received by asylum seekers.(2) The International Health Medical Service IHMS contracted to provide health care on Christmas Island, as well as offshore processing countries like Nauru and PNG, has an almost impossible role to perform given the underlying causes of ill health for asylum seekers. This is because the nature of the detention environment means that "recommendations aimed at improving detainees' psychological and social circumstances cannot be implemented".(3)

As far back as February 2011, before the first Christmas Island riot, the Commonwealth Ombudsman noted in his report " the stage has been reached where the current scale of operations at Christmas Island as very remote from the mainland and supporting infrastructure and services is not sustainable".(4)

The 'behavioural management' regime inside Christmas Island mirrors that used in Guantanamo Bay. It relies on solitary confinement, 24 hour surveillance, denial of access to a phone or the internet and systemic force, reprisals, and beatings by the Serco guards of anyone who they consider steps out of line.

There is no reason for asylum seekers to be sent there. They have committed no crime. Fazal Chegeni whose death ignited the tensions inside the detention centre, should never have been moved to Christmas Island.

Christmas Island is being used as the punishment centre of the government's detention regime. People are arbitrarily moved there as a punitive measure. There is also no reason for those who have committed minor offences to be in immigration detention. They have already done their time, according to the criminal justice system.

As regards safety, how many deaths and riots need to happen before both Government and Opposition are prepared to acknowledge that immigration detention in remote, prison like conditions are cruel, inhumane and inappropriate, as well as massively exorbitant in operational costs.

Riots, born of desperation, anger and hopelessness, have occurred on Christmas Island, Nauru and notably on Manus Island, leading to the death of Reza Berati and numerous severely injured detainees.

The punitive regime on Christmas Island must end. Like Nauru and Manus, Christmas Island should be closed.

Robin Rothfield and Shane Prince
National Convenors

1. JSCAIDN, p. 114. 2. p. 117.
3. S Mares and J Jureidini, 'Psychiatric assessment of children and families in immigration detention – clinical, administrative and ethical issues', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 28(6), 2004, pp. 520–6, accessed 25 June 2013.
4. Hawke & Williams, p 45 Independent Review set up by Immigration Minister 2011.