

Abuse on the Mainland: Australia's Medevac Hotel Detentions

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Governments that issue press releases about the abuse of human rights tend to avoid close gazes at the mirror. Doing so would be telling. In the case of Australia, its record on dealing with refugees is both abysmal and cruel. It tends to be easier to point the finger at national security laws in Hong Kong and concentration camps in Xinjiang. Wickedness is always easily found afar.

Australia's own concentration camp system hums along, inflicting suffering upon asylum seekers and refugees who fled suffering by keeping them in a state of calculated limbo. Its brutality has been so normalised, it barely warrants mention in Australia's sterile news outlets. In penitence, the country's literary establishment pays homage to the victims, such as the Kurdish Iranian writer Behrouz Boochani. Garlands and literary prizes have done nothing to shift the vicious centre in Canberra. Boat arrivals remain political slurry and are treated accordingly.

Recently, there were small signs that prevalent amnesia and indifference was being disturbed. The fate of some 200 refugees and asylum seekers brought to the Australian mainland for emergency medical treatment piqued the interest of certain activists. Prior to its repeal as part of a secret arrangement between the Morrison government and Tasmanian senator Jacqui Lambie in December last year, the medical evacuation law was a mixed blessing.

While it was championed as a humanitarian instrument, it did not ensure one iota of freedom. As before, limbo followed like a dank smell. The repeal of the legislation offered another prospect of purgatory, only this time on the mainland.

The individuals in question have found themselves detained in Melbourne at the Mantra Bell City Hotel in Preston, and the Kangaroo Point Central Hotel in Brisbane. In the mind of Refugee Action Coalition spokesman Ian Rintoul, the conditions at both abodes [are more restrictive](#) than those on Nauru. The medical help promised has also been tardily delivered, if at all.

"My life is exactly the size of a room, and a narrow corridor," [reflects](#) Mostafa (Moz) Azimitabar, who has been detained at the Mantra for 13 months. Like his fellow detainees, he has become a spectacle, able to see protesters gather outside the hotel, the signs pleading for their release, drivers honking in solidarity. He sees himself as "a fish inside an aquarium ... The whole of my life in this window to see the real life, where people are driving, walking; when they wave to us. And when I wave back at them. This is my life."

When former Australian soccer player turned human rights activist Craig Foster visited Azimitabar, conversation could only take place between a transparent plastic barrier. “I had to talk with him behind the glass,” [tweeted](#) the detainee. “Several times a day Serco officers enter my room and there aren’t any glasses for them.”

After the visit, Foster [described](#) the corrosion of liberties, “this constant theme of the most onerous regulations ... constantly chipping away – just taking another right, another right, another right, and making them feel less and less and less human, if that’s possible after eight years.”

The more obstreperous refugees have been targeted by the Department of Home Affairs and forcibly relocated. Iranian refugee Farhad Rahmati found himself [shifted](#) from Kangaroo Point to the Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation Centre (BITA), and then to Villawood. BITA also received four more from Kangaroo Point in mid-November.

The advent of COVID-19 compounded the situation. Detainees already vulnerable to other medical conditions faced another danger. The authorities gave a big shrug. Shared bathrooms are the norm and are infrequently cleaned. Hand sanitizer containers [are left empty or broken](#). The inquiry into the failure of Victoria’s quarantine system that led to a second infectious wave in Melbourne avoided considering the conditions of detained refugees. Writing in *Eureka Street*, Andra Jackson [wondered](#) if this had anything to do with the fact “that these men, now detained in some instances for six to seven years, have behaved more responsibly than [sic] some returning travellers.”

The government authorities did release five refugees from the medevac hotels last week, threatened by lawsuits testing the legal status of their detention. On December 14, the 60 men detained at the Mantra were told that they would be moving to another undisclosed location. The conclusion of the contract with the hotel has the Department of Home Affairs considering its options, and all are bound to aggravate the distress of the detainees.

Alison Battinson of Human Rights for All has a [suggestion](#) bound to be ignored. “Instead of telling the gentlemen that they are going to be moved to another place of detention – that hasn’t been disclosed to them – the more sensible approach would be to release them as per the law.”

The only ray of compassion in this mess of inhumanity has come in the form of a Canadian resettlement scheme. Nine refugees have already availed themselves of the opportunity; another twenty await their fate. Australian politicians, as they so often do on this subject, are nowhere to be found.

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Featured image: Australian refugees detained at the Kangaroo Point Central Hotel, Brisbane | CNN

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