

Medevac Refugee: 'We Are Not Treated Like Human Beings'

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*“When I left Sudan in 2003, I was looking for a safe place,” said **Babkir Omda**, a Medevac refugee who is detained in the Park Hotel prison in Melbourne. “I was running from the genocide in Darfur, West Sudan. I lost many family members and relatives. That’s why I ran.*

“I came to Australia with great difficulty. I escaped to Indonesia and, after spending nine days in the ocean, I arrived at Christmas Island and then went to Manus Island.

“After two years, I got my refugee status and my United Nations High Commission for Refugees identification number.

“I had to leave behind my wife, daughter, parents, brothers and sisters. My daughter, who is now eight years old, always asks me: “Why are you in detention?”

“I don’t have answers. Sometimes it’s hard to speak to her because how can I explain why I am imprisoned indefinitely, without crime? Even criminals have a limited [sentence].”

Omda said it had become stressful trying to explain his and other refugees’ situation to family members. This is because many struggle to believe that the Australian government would lock up their loved ones, sometimes also questioning their innocence.

“Because everyone is far away from me, they don’t understand: everyone thinks if you are in detention, it means you have committed a crime.

“Some of our friends ask, ‘Did you do any crime? Why are you remaining in detention?’

“I am very depressed and frustrated. I can’t have anyone ask me questions like that. No one believes you and they think you committed crimes.”

While anxious and tired from eight years of living his life in limbo, Omda still manages to

express disbelief, even humour, at the way the Medevac refugees are transferred between detention centres.

Referring to the excessive numbers of police, including some on horseback, he said: “Even criminals are not moved like that. Every road is blocked like we are international criminals.

“When we were transferred from [the Mantra Hotel to the Park Hotel](#), the police came towards us on horseback and I had flashbacks from Darfur!

“I told my friend, today we are being moved by the Janjaweed!”

Janjaweed, which translates to “devils on horseback”, is the [paramilitary group](#) that terrorised the people of Darfur who rose up against the dictatorship. The paramilitary group was responsible for massacring many Sudanese civilians.

Omda was transferred to Australia from Manus Island in August 2019 under the now defunct Medevac law because he suffered a bad injury in 2014.

Omda has been in the hotel prison for 18 months and has yet to receive specialist medical care. He, like many other Medevac refugees, was brought to the country for medical treatment but is only getting sicker.

“Before I came here [Park Hotel, Carlton] I applied to go to the United States. I failed a medical check.

“For the first three months at the Mantra, there were no open windows, no sun, no fresh air and we are not allowed to go outside the room. More than five times a day, officers would check the windows.

“Last June, I got this lung problem and I was coughing blood. I have never smoked, never drunk.

“I was sent for another medical check to go to America. They thought I had TB [tuberculosis], but the test came back negative.” Omda blames being locked up at the hotel prisons as the reason for his lung problem.

Because of this mistreatment in Australia, quite a few imprisoned Medevac refugees are now requesting to be transferred back to Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

The Department of Home Affairs is dealing with this request in its same cruel way.

Omda said his friend, another detained refugee, who put in a removal request with the department was told that he could leave but would have to give up any future right to settle in Australia. He was also told he would have to pay for his removal — including a plane ticket — which, of course, is not possible.

While Omda does not want to go back to Manus Island, he said at least there they felt like humans.

"In Manus, we were in detention but, after 2016, we could go outside in fresh air. Manus is not safe, we got attacked. But we feel like human beings, a little bit.

"But here, we are not like human beings."

Speaking about the Park Hotel, he said:

"This is a bad hotel; no windows are open. Only level 4 has a balcony if you need to smoke, or get fresh air, but most rooms here don't have any windows.

"The food is very bad. They bring raw meat and just put it in boiling water: it smells bad. No one will give a dog this food. But no one is complaining about the food. We need to get out from here."

Many refugees are having trouble sleeping due to anxiety over their uncertain future.

"I'm sleeping around two to three hours per day because of stress and worry. When I go to sleep, I'm thinking, 'Why am I here?'."

Omda also spoke of the appalling mental health services provided by the department.

"The mental health [authorities] have only one solution — they just give you sleeping tablets.

"When I ask, 'What am I still doing here? How much longer am I going to be here?', they say, 'Don't ask anything' and give me sleeping tablets.

"That is not treatment; those tablets are addictive and for two, three days, you can't sleep.

"I once asked a mental health professional, 'If you have someone inside a fire — do you let him burn first inside the fire and then treat him, or do you take him out of the fire first?' Of course he said, 'Take him out of the fire first'."

Omda said the reason refugees are being given sleeping tablets is to gag them, and make life easier for the Serco guards.

"My friend slept around 18 hours continuously. It's more comfortable for the staff, the Serco guards, because you are not asking any questions.

"I tell my case manager that I am a human being and ask what is happening, why am I remaining here? They always respond the same way — 'I don't know'.

"How is it that you don't know? Ask someone who knows. No one is saying anything, they keep silent, no one answers to me. Some of them don't have human heart."

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