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Australia: Ten-year-old policy of detention is failing

"As the risk of fatalities increases in ongoing unrest within Australian immigration detention centres, it is clear that the ten-year-old policy of mandatory detention is failing and needs urgent review," Amnesty International said today.

"Of immediate concern is the mental health of the detainees -- hunger strikes, self-harm and attempted suicides of detainees have obvious roots in extreme desperation. This is created by the combined effects of prolonged incarceration, social isolation and increasing uncertainty about the future, with many people fearing for their lives if returned to their home countries."

No other country imprisons hundreds of children, and thousands of men and women for lacking a visa under a national policy requiring their automatic and indefinite detention, without charge or review by a court. Contrary to the government's line, the policy of detention has not deterred refugees -- as most of them are found to be -- trying to arrive without authorization. The government claims that refugees with valid travel documents are welcome, but people fleeing persecution often cannot apply for visa at distant embassies and then wait months or years for approval.

"Locking up thousands of refugee applicants has proven not to stop new attempts at reaching Australia. Are Australians really willing to pay any price, human and financial, to maintain a 10-year-old detention policy which has failed to halt desperate actions to seek refuge?" the organization asked.

The focus on the physical conditions in the detention centres detracts from the key issue behind the unrest - mental health. Medical professionals and informed observers have repeatedly raised concerns about the detainees' mental health and the standards of medical care in detention.

Amnesty International called on the Australian government to relieve detainee anxieties by easing some of the pressures which underlie their desperate actions. At the very least, families with children and those already found to meet refugee criteria should be released, pending completion of their visa approvals. Detention should be the exception, not the rule, and determined case by case.

Ultimately, parliament should reconsider the underlying factors contributing to acts of desperation in detention, and enable a substantial increase of efforts to address the causes of international refugee flows, notably human rights abuses.

Amnesty International does not condone any acts of self-harm or violence, whether committed by asylum-seekers or others protesting their conditions. Neither does it believe the Australian government can escape its share of the responsibility for the circumstances driving detainees into desperation.

Ongoing fighting and instability in Afghanistan, home to many of the detainees, makes it unlikely that Afghan asylum-seekers can safely return in the near future. The Australian experiment with automatic mass detention proves once again the need for increased international cooperation to slow refugee flows and provide humane conditions and solutions for those unable to return home in safety.

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