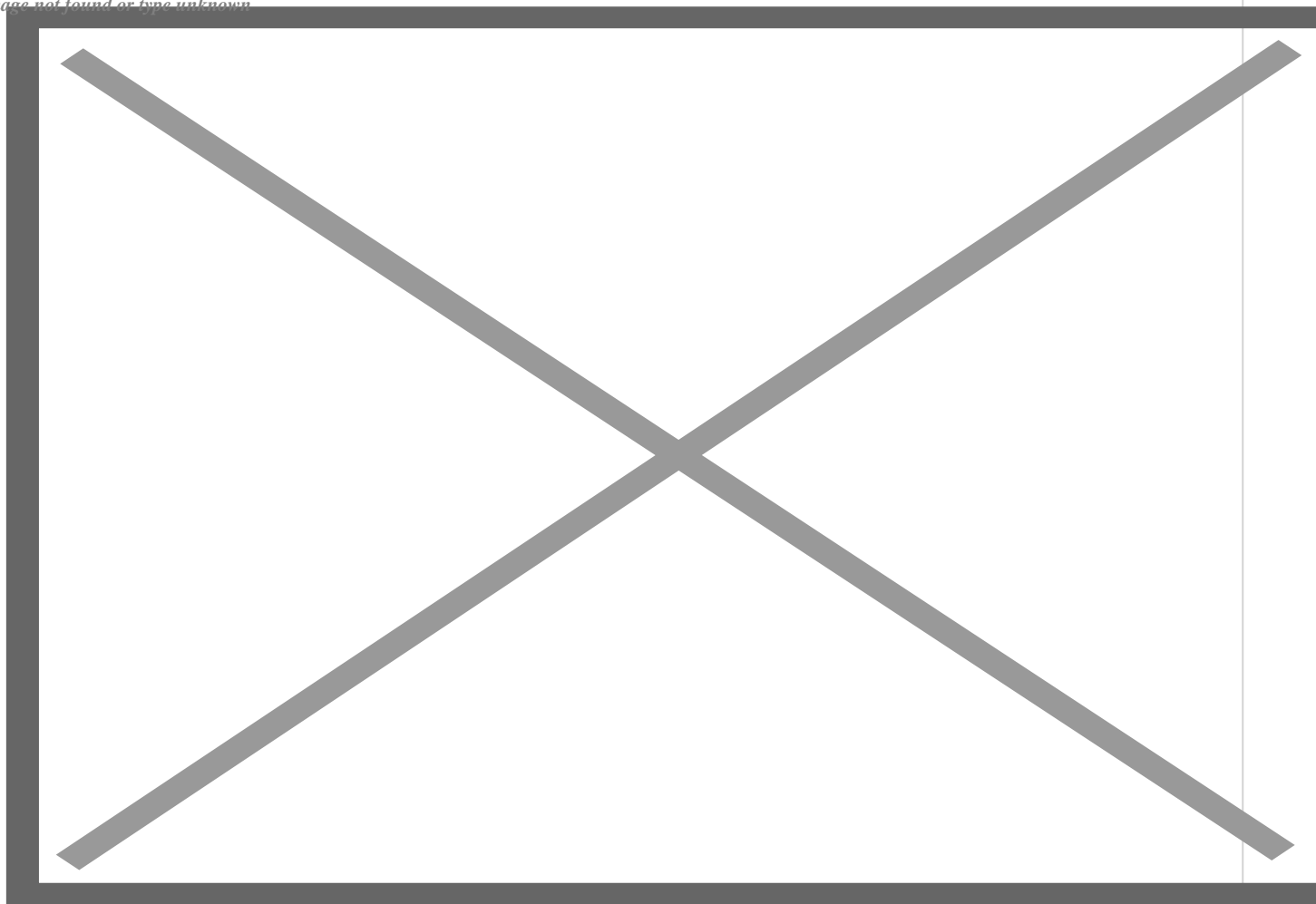


Refugees on Australian detention island sew lips shut in protest

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Mohammad Kaium stands with his lips sewn together, holding a placard that "We are still in 10 years in Nauru Torturing Center. Please stop the Torturing! We need freedom." Writing on his t-shirt says, "10 years in limbo stop Please!"

Canberra, February 25 (RHC)-- Two refugees on the tiny island nation of Nauru — a five-hour plane journey from Australia in the southwestern Pacific Ocean — have sewn their lips together in protest against their almost decade-long detention on the island.

Australia has used Nauru since July 2013 to detain asylum seekers who travel to Australia by boat. Some were also sent to Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Manus Island for processing, with all of them told they would never be allowed to settle in Australia.

The policy has had an extreme effect on refugees and asylum seekers held under its stipulations. About 150 refugees and asylum seekers are currently in Nauru and PNG, with little to no knowledge of when — or, if ever — they will be resettled.

The two protesters, Mohammad Shofiqul Islam and Mohammad Kaium, have been detained on Nauru for nearly 10 years. Mohammad Shofiqul Islam spoke for them both via the WhatsApp messaging service from where they are holding their protest near RPC1, the administrative hub for refugee services and security in Nauru.

“We are hunger strik[ing],” he wrote in a message to Al Jazeera. “We closed our lips and we [have] stopped eating and drinking ... we can't speak,” Shofiqul Islam said. “We don't eat and don't drink until we get our medical treatment and freedom.”

The two men travelled separately to Australia from Bangladesh in 2013, he said, to seek asylum from persecution in their home country. Their boats were intercepted by the Australian navy and they were eventually sent to Nauru.

Since 2015, refugees and asylum seekers on Nauru have been detained in the wider island community. But the situation is “not safe”, Shofiqul Islam said. “In Nauru, people are treat[ing] us like we are animals — not human,” he said.

“Here in Nauru, very poor medical treatment,” he continued. “And we are not safe here. People ... here, they don't like refugees. They hate us.”

The abuse and neglect of detainees — in what rights group Amnesty International described as Nauru's “open-air prison” — have been well documented. Refugees have been medically evacuated following attacks and for the treatment of chronic illness. Mental health is also a serious issue for the detainees.

Self-harm and even suicidal behaviour were reported among children held there. The last four of more than 200 children who were once detained on Nauru were resettled to the United States in 2019.

Shofiqul Islam has begun the process of applying for resettlement in the U.S. under a 2016 resettlement arrangement between Canberra and Washington. But he has been engaged in the process for more than three years already and neither Shofiqul Islam nor Kaium knows when they will be released.

He and Kaium, who is not in the resettlement process for the US, are desperate to get off the island and end their indefinite detention. “We need medical treatment ... freedom. We want justice,” he wrote. “Why we are 10 years in limbo without any crime? Our hearts are broke[n] now, we can't take anymore. Please help us to get our freedom.”

Even as Shofiqul Islam and Kaium protest for their freedom and that of other refugees, the Australian government recently signed off on legislation giving it the legal power to continue processing asylum claims offshore and, effectively, solidifying detentions on Nauru.

Behrouz Boochani — an award-winning author, former refugee and political commentator — has accused the Australian Labor Party of “lying” about its reasons for utilising offshore processing.

Officially, the offshore detention of refugees and asylum seekers who arrive by boat to Australia is a mechanism for preventing people smuggling. “But that is just something that they [use] to justify this cruelty,” Behrouz said, explaining that both of Australia's major political parties, Labor and the centre-right Liberal Party, have created fear around asylum seekers arriving by boat and have used tough immigration

policies to win votes.

“They hide themselves behind national security,” he said. “Believe me, nothing will happen if they release [the refugees on Nauru],” he added. Behrouz, who was held for six years on Manus before finding refuge in New Zealand, also said there was a lot of money to be made in detaining refugees and asylum seekers. He cited a 420 million Australian-dollar (\$286 million) contract agreed earlier this year between the Australian government and a US private prisons operator, Management and Training Corporation (MTC), to run “garrison and welfare” on Nauru.

A spokesperson for Australia’s Home Affairs Department declined to comment on the cases of Shofiquil Islam and Kaium. They told Al Jazeera that the government “remains committed to regional processing in Nauru” and that those detained on the island had access to medical services, including for mental health, with “mechanisms in place” to transfer those most in need to Australia or Taiwan.

“Regional processing provides unauthorised maritime arrivals the opportunity to have their protection claims assessed by a regional processing country, and if found to be in need of international protection, support to identify a durable migration pathway,” the spokesperson said. “Third country resettlement also supports the Government’s no settlement in Australia policy for unauthorised maritime arrivals.”

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/314909-refugees-on-australian-detention-island-sew-lips-shut-in-protest>



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