

Labor Must Bring Refugees to Safety from Indonesia, PNG and Nauru

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Calls were made for Labor to bring refugees held in offshore detention to safety at a Refugee Action Collective (RAC) organised speak-out on November 18.

Max Costello, from RAC, said about 14,000 refugees and asylum seekers remain in Indonesia after Coalition immigration minister Scott Morrison decided in 2014 that even people recognised as refugees by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees would never be allowed to come to Australia.

Hussain Shah Rezaie, a Hazara refugee from Afghanistan, who spoke by phone from Indonesia, said he was kept in detention for three and a half years before being released. He has been there for nine years and said refugees feel hopeless and abandoned.

About 60 refugees have died since 2014, 18 by suicide. "Your actions give us hope", he said, adding that they hold weekly protests.

Margaret Sinclair, also from RAC, said refugees in Indonesia have no right to work, study or get a driver's licence or bank account. Indonesia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention.

Most live in accommodation blocks, that Sinclair described as "ghettos". Whole families are in one room, 3 by 3 metres, and are subject to a curfew.

Those who arrived before March 2018 receive an Australian government allowance of \$100 a month for adults and \$50 for children. The money is distributed by the International Organisation for Migration. Those who arrived after March 2018 receive nothing.

Sinclair said that half the refugees in Indonesia are Hazaras, some of whom had helped the Australian Defence Force in Afghanistan.

She called on Labor to lift the ban on taking refugees from Indonesia and raise the humanitarian intake.

Sinclair said 62 sent by Australia to the former detention centre on Manus Island are still in Papua New Guinea, unable to obtain resettlement in the United States or New Zealand. Some are too sick to even apply.

They live in Port Moresby and face the threat of being thrown out of their accommodation.

Sinclair reported that 11 had recently been sent to Nauru, where the detention centre had been empty for some time. She said Labor should repeal the laws that make offshore detention possible.

Betlehem Tibebu Zeleke, a refugee from Ethiopia, who has finally been freed, spoke about the impact of detention on her and others' mental health. She spent time in Indonesia, but seeing the hopelessness among refugees there she "decided to jump on a boat". She was sent to Nauru, where she "lost hope". She said that prolonged detention "damages your brain".

Eventually she was brought to Australia and, after a period of detention in Brisbane, set free.

Danae Bosler, representing the Victorian Trades Hall Council, called on the government to lift its ban on taking refugees from Indonesia. Tim Read, a Greens MP, criticised the policy of using Indonesia and PNG as a "dumping ground" for refugees. He said Labor should talk to the Greens rather than look to Peter Dutton for "inspiration".

Greg Kiernan spoke about a project to raise money for refugees in Indonesia by selling artworks they have created.

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Featured image: Speaking out for refugees. Photo: Matt Hrkac

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