



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Hazara asylum seekers hunger strike on Nauru, 2003-2004

Time period notes: Although it is clear that struggle continues on Nauru, no information about outcome is available after January 23, 2004.

December 10,
2003

to: January
2004

Country: Nauru

Country: Australia

Location City/State/Province: Nauru, Micronesia

Location Description: Refugee camps and hospitals

Goals:

A review of the refugee status of Afghani asylum seekers. Implicitly, the campaigners also sought admission into Australia and citizenship there.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Hunger Strike
- Other... › Sewing mouths shut to prevent consumption during the Hunger Strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Hunger Strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Hunger Strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Hunger Strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Hunger Strike

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 010. Newspapers and journals

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Hazara Afghani and Pakistani refugees

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Afghani, Pakistani, Palestinian, Iraqi and Iranian refugees seeking asylum in Australia, currently detained at a camp on Nauru. Specific leaders not known.

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Hassan Ghulam and the Hazara Ethnic Society of Australia; A Just Australia; Rural Australians for Refugees

Involvement of social elites:

Australian Medical Association

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Refugee Asylum Seekers on Nauru; Hazara Ethnic Society of Australia; A Just Australia; Rural Australians for Refugee;

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Australian Medical Association

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 9 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Amanda Vandstone (Australian Immigration Minister) and the Australian Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Although there isn't any documentation to suggest that the campaigners received asylum in Australia, increased attention to their struggle has improved living conditions.

For decades, Australia's notoriously strict immigration policy has prevented asylum seekers from residing on the mainland of the continent. From 2001 to 2008, Nauru, the smallest sovereign island nation in the world, supported itself economically by hosting an Australian detention center in exchange for medical and financial support. During that time period, the detention center hosted between 200 and 1200 refugees, mainly ethnically Hazara Afghans. Hazara are a Shi'a sect of Muslims often persecuted by the Sunni majority in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

On December 10, 2003, the United Nations' annual World Human Rights Day, eight Afghani and one Pakistani asylum seekers began a hunger strike, to highlight their plight. Four of the protesters physically sewed their mouths shut, to symbolize their silence and struggle, and to gain attention. Their protest began out of concern for a detainee who had attempted suicide the week before. As their strike began, Hassan Ghulam, president of the Hazara Ethnic Society of Australia, began to inform the public about the plight of Hazara held on Nauru, giving newspaper interviews on behalf of the refugees. At that point, the Australian government refused to acknowledge the hunger strike, or comment upon it.

By December 17, 24 asylum seekers were engaged in a hunger strike. As Australian Immigration Minister, Amanda Vandstone continued to deny the existence of a hunger strike, human rights lawyers from A Just Australia and Rural Australians for Refugees filed lawsuits in Australian courts on behalf of the refugees, with little success. Two days later, 35 asylum seekers were involved, and, up to nine days into their strike, 15 men had been hospitalized. At this point, the hunger strike began to gain Western news attention, and was reported on in The Guardian, and the BBC News. By December 24, 2003, the strike had grown to more than 40 detainees, and 18 had been hospitalized. That day, as a result of increased international attention, the United Nations' refugee body, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, announced its plan to review the international refugee status of the Afghani Hazara. However, the refugee's asylum had originally been denied by Australia itself, not the United Nations, making the review symbolic at best.

At this point, medical facilities on Nauru began to state that they were running out of medical resources for the entire island while attempting to care for the hunger strikers. They issued a formal request to the Australian Medical Association (AMA) to send a team of doctors to bring resources, care, and oversight to the refugee camps. The AMA agreed, and began preparations to send a team of six physicians. In response to this news, the hunger strikers suspended their strike on January 8, 2004. However, on January 23, it became clear that the Australian government was preventing the AMA from visiting Nauru, threatening to

revoke national aid if doctors were allowed to inspect the conditions. Many of the hunger strikers remained unable to stand, walk, or digest solids as a result of their prolonged fast. Despite pleas, it is unclear that they ever received the necessary medical attention.

A building series of hunger strikes from diverse groups of refugees seeking asylum in Australia continued between 2004 and 2008. The Nauruan detainment camp was closed in 2008. Refugees continue to struggle for entrance to Australia, and compensation for the neglect they experienced while detained.

Research Notes

Influences:

Although not explicitly stated, the strikers were undoubtedly influenced by a long tradition of hunger strikes in prisons. (1)

Sources:

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[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>