



Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group Inc

Post: PO Box 201 Wentworth Falls NSW
2782

Website: www.bmrsg.org.au

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/>

BlueMountainsRefugeeSupportGroup

Chair: Joy Connor

Secretary: Brendan Doyle

secretary@bmrsg.org.au

Ms Susan Templeman MP.

PO Box 855 WINDSOR NSW 2756.

Susan.Templeman.MP@aph.gov.au

February 7th 2019

Migration Amendment (Urgent Medical Treatment) Bill 2018

Dear Susan,

On behalf of the Blue Mountains Refugee Group I write to give you further information on the situation of detainees on Manus Island and those in Port Moresby whose fate could be decided by the Migration Amendment (Urgent Medical Treatment) Bill 2018 and reiterate our support for this bill. Below is information from one of our members and another mental health nurse. Their information is verified by reports we have received from Father Giorgio Licini, Pime, General Secretary Catholic Bishops Conference of PNGI & SI. which I have added to this correspondence. It can be accessed at <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/380827/enough-is-enough-catholic-church-condemns-manus-detention>

We understand that the current government is proposing a compromise solution to avoid taking this bill to a vote in the parliament. However those of our membership who are currently in daily contact by phone and facebook with people on Manus fear that any increase in the levels of bureaucracy in determining people's need of medical care will cause more delays, permanent physical and mental health damage and lead to further loss of life . The evidence of two medical doctors should surely be sufficient to underline the need for evacuation. The bill also provides for the evacuation of children and family members with the sick person, a vital ingredient in their long- term recovery. In the opinion of those on the ground both these elements need to be part of any compromise solution

The current situation on Manus is dire for those who are unwell. Detainees have no resistance to common tropical diseases and indefinite detention is a major cause of mental health issues. Our member, Lynne Murphy a registered mental health nurse who has worked via contract on Manus Island and holds a Masters in Nursing is in constant contact with detainees. She reported on January 30th 2019 that

“ A depressed young man attempted to set himself on fire on January 26, 2019. This was not the first time that he has attempted to die this way. He was rescued by the fire rescue team with police support. He was returned to the camp, after being given medication by the mental health nurse. He promptly overdosed by taking twice what was prescribed. He remains in the camp. He has been depressed for a long time but things have changed lately. He slipped from depression to psychosis about a month ago. Now he experiences command hallucinations - friends in his head tell him to burn things and kill himself. I suspect that it could be that the command hallucinations are a reaction to the drugs he is being given. The medications were Risperidone & Valium. Valium can cause hallucinations. Risperidone can cause mania. He is suffering but not being treated with the appropriate professional skills. He is a danger to himself and others, but is expected to care for himself. The whole camp is endangered “

Nurse Lynne Murphy also reports the situation of another detainee on 30/1/19 *“I am very worried about him. He has several critical illnesses. I talk to him every night to try to distract him from the pain. He cannot lie down without waking at 2 or 3 am & crying in pain. He needs to be in critical care unit and is at risk of fatal consequences of not being treated. He is not in hospital, is in the camp. Is given pain relief that does not relieve the pain. He is sent for repeats of the same tests and promised that specialists will review the results, but this does not happen. “*

Nurse Murphy recently received messages from another refugee outlining conditions in the local hospital

“Refugee has been depressed and wanting to die for a long time. When he could not get help from PIH Manus clinic so he tried to hang himself on January 20th 2019. Then he stopped eating & drinking 5 days ago. Now he is too sick in Lorengau Hospital.” The refugee went on to say “Lorengau hospital as they call it is just like a farm. Local people going in and out into his room and touch him the whole time. Babies crying, people screaming from their pain, kids playing ball inside, people playing loud music and talking next the patients, noise of the cars outside all time. This is where the ABF takes the refugees who are mentally sick. They put this man there now for 4 days and PIH didn't even try to check on him. His condition is getting worse there and he's been not eating or drinking much for 6 days. The nurses there have nothing to offer him other than Panadol.

Is that how the men who suffer from depression should be treated?”

Unfortunately the Pacific International Hospital in Moresby, to which people are evacuated, does not have the capacity to assist adequately either, see the last section of this letter.

The medical staff we are in contact with have a well-founded fear of the impact on people’s health of the bureaucratic processes currently in place. The addition of another level via “an expert panel” would compromise treatment even further

For example one man arrived on Manus Island with a significant knee injury. He was relocated to Australia for this operation then forced back to Manus prior to the operation due to visa issues and failed bureaucratic processes He is now in a dangerously depressed state in Moresby after several failed operations. His capacity to ever work again has been severely compromised by failed processes and the lack of adequate health care.

Another example was reported by Lynne Elworthy, a registered mental health nurse on 22.1.2019. *“A person seeking asylum began in 2014, to report stomach pain and painful bleeding from the bowel. After extensive consultation with medical staff his condition continued to be resistant to all treatment, so he was transferred in 2015 for a specialist appointment in Port Moresby. When the specialist did not arrive, he was forcefully returned to Lombrum Immigration Detention Centre on Manus - again due to failed bureaucratic processes.– after this his physical presentation and his mental health significantly deteriorated. In early November 2018 he was barred from attending the Clinic for a 2 week period - because he took blades into the clinic and threatened to self harm if he did not get help to resolve his stomach pain. Despite representation from community leaders he suffered through 14 days of no access to medical treatment and most prescribed medications. Around this time, he reduced his diet to little or no food, saying he made this decision, not as an act of deliberate starvation but because of the pain food caused his stomach. It has now been weeks – increasing into months – since he has eaten properly. On the 18th November 2018 he was transferred to PIH Port Moresby. IV fluids commenced and I understand are still continuing.”*

Verification from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands¹

The general secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and Solomon Islands, Giorgio Licini, returned to Port Moresby at the end of January 2019 from Manus Island where he said three refugees attempted suicide during his two day visit.

¹ <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/380827/enough-is-enough-catholic-church-condemns-manus-detention>

"These self harm and suicide attempts, they are a daily occurrence," he said

"If nothing is done immediately we are going to have, in the next few weeks, people not only getting sick, seriously, not only getting crazy, completely, we are going to have people die."

Fr Licini was allowed to visit about 600 refugees detained in three facilities in the island's main town, Lorengau. Most have been detained on Manus for almost six years for trying to reach Australia by boat to seek asylum. Seven have died on Manus. Upon his return to the PNG capital, Fr Licini visited about 20 Manus refugees at Pacific International Hospital (PIH) *"in extremely serious conditions as far as their mental health is concerned. At least two of them are on the verge of death,"* he said.

"There is an Iraqi who is refusing food and drink, he's almost unconscious... This guy, he's going in a few days. Another man, who had swallowed "pieces of metal" and was unlikely to receive surgery at Pacific International Hospital was among a number at the hospital who had given up and were "just waiting to die", he said. *"Other refugees at Pacific International Hospital with complaints including kidney stones, respiratory and heart problems were practically unattended. Pacific International Hospital is not equipped in any way for serious cases,"* Fr Licini warned. *"If you want to save their lives you have to take them to Australia or another country."*

"There is one and only one solution," he said. *"For the prime minister of Papua New Guinea to tell the prime minister of Australia, either incoming or ongoing, that enough is enough. These people have paid a price that is beyond what humans can tolerate... They are giving up on their lives... This chapter has to close within the next few weeks or few months."*

Our group has come to feel that Australians need to see offshore processing as a separate issue from attempts to stop asylum seeker boats. Well resourced boat turn-backs, where people's safety has been negotiated with the country they are returned to, are an effective solution to unregulated arrivals by sea and the dangers that involves. Punishing innocent people by indefinite detention as a deterrent to others, is in our opinion, a morally bankrupt policy which destroys lives, has no proven effect on boat arrivals and has tarnished our reputation as a decent country.

I do hope the above is of some use in your efforts to assist these desperate people. We are so proud of you. Thank you once again for being such an amazing local member.

Yours Sincerely

Joy Connor

Chairperson