

Project SafeCom News and Updates

Monday, 14 March 2016

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1. Refugee misery 'beyond imagination' at crowded Idomeni camp on Greece-Macedonia border

ABC News Online / AFP

Posted Mon 14 Mar 2016, 5:21 am

The "human misery" being endured by refugees has reached a deplorable peak at the overcrowded Idomeni camp on the Greek border with Macedonia, a UN refugee agency spokesman says.

More than 14,000 people are stuck in and around the overflowing camp, with basic living conditions deteriorating as they wait for a border closed last week to be reopened.

"We are seeing human misery at its peak in Europe. These conditions here at the Idomeni border site are just unliveable," visiting UNHCR head Babar Baloch said.

"It has just gone beyond imagination how bad it can get and each day we are getting more rain, people are suffering."

Greek authorities say there are 12,000 people in the camp. NGOs say more than 2,000 others are having to survive in fields beyond its perimeter.

Conditions have become unhygienic in the extreme — toilets have overflowed while dozens of children have been hospitalised, suffering from breathing difficulties and an assortment of viruses.

One nine-year-old Syrian girl with hepatitis A was hospitalised at nearby Thessalonika, where the Keelpno disease prevention centre reported her condition as stable.

On Saturday, the Greek Government said it would deal with the crisis at Idomeni within a week by transferring refugees there to other reception centres.

But the UNHCR underlined the situation required urgent attention.

"We as UNHCR hope that the Greek authorities move fast ... because remaining here even one minute is not an option," Mr Baloch said.

"They cannot be kept here for long in these inhumane conditions. They need to be offered a way out of here and they are desperate.

"You see children shivering, walking barefoot on the road here in this misery. It is just unimaginable."

Sunday saw a 200-strong group of Syrians and Iraqis, including many children, demonstrate at Idomeni, demanding the border be re-opened, just the latest in a succession of daily protests.

The refugees are clinging on, despite the atrocious conditions, in the hope an EU summit on Thursday will bring decisions to aid their plight and lead to the border being reopened.

The Balkan trail from Greece to northern Europe used by floods of asylum seekers was blocked last week after a string of nations slammed shut their borders.

Slovenia and Croatia, two of the countries along the well-trodden route, said no asylum seekers wishing to transit towards other countries would be allowed to enter after midnight.

This was followed by Macedonia, who announced its border had closed "completely", while Serbia indicated it would follow suit.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-14/refugee-misery-beyond-imagination-at-idomeni-refugee-camp-un/7243716>

2. Julie Bishop to challenge Iran's treatment of Baha'i minority during talks with foreign minister

ABC News Online

By political reporter Dan Conifer

First posted Mon 14 Mar 2016, 4:20am

Updated Mon 14 Mar 2016, 4:23am

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has vowed to raise Iran's human rights record in meetings with her Iranian counterpart in Canberra this week.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif will meet with Ms Bishop, Trade Minister Steve Ciobo and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, and hopes to meet Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Australia this week hopes to strike a deal with Iran to return thousands of failed asylum seekers, and is looking to improve access for Australian businesses, students and tourists to the nation of more than 75 million people.

But human rights, including the persecution of minority groups, will also be on the agenda.

"The Australian Government has consistently urged Iran to progress human rights, both bilaterally and in relevant UN bodies," Ms Bishop told ABC News.

"I will again raise Iran's record on human rights, including the treatment of Baha'i communities, when I meet Dr Zarif this week, as I did during my visit to Tehran in April 2015."

The Baha'i faith was established in Iran in the 1800s and its followers have been persecuted for decades in the Islamic nation.

Ms Bishop's comments follow calls from Australia's Baha'i community to raise the plight with Dr Zarif, including the case of seven leaders imprisoned in Iran for 20 years for alleged espionage and "insulting religious sanctities".

"Australian officials have higher level access to Iranian officials as has been the case in the past and as more spaces open up for exchange between the countries that provides more opportunities for these issues to be raised and discussed," Australian Baha'i community spokeswoman Natalie Mobini said.

"Australia is a leader in the human rights community internationally and I think we need to maintain our reputation for that," Dr Mobini said.

Hundreds of Baha'is have been imprisoned and executed, and members of the faith are discriminated against, including being denied access to higher education.

Dr Zarif's visit follows the country agreeing to curb its nuclear activities in return for sanctions being lifted, and comes after Ms Bishop's trip to Tehran last year.

"The Foreign Minister's visit to Australia provides an opportunity for me to raise my concerns directly," Ms Bishop said.

"The Government has always been aware and realistic in our approach towards Iran. We pursue Australia's interests. Where we do not agree with Iran we register our views frankly and this will continue."

Ms Bishop hopes to strike a deal with her counterpart to send more than 8,000 failed asylum seekers back to the country, which does not accept involuntary returns, including a guarantee those returned would not be persecuted or punished.

Iran refuses to take back those who are not willing to return, but it is understood negotiations with Australia on the issue are well-advanced.

Dr Zarif will also deliver a public address at the Australian National University on Tuesday.

Comment was sought from Iran's embassy in Australia.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-14/bishop-to-hold-talks-with-iran-foreign-minister-dr-javad-zarif/7243474>

3. Sri Lanka Navy arrests 17 Australia-bound illegal immigrants

ColomboPage

Sat, Mar 5, 2016, 09:00 pm SL Time

ColomboPage News Desk, Sri Lanka.

Mar 05, Colombo: Sri Lanka Navy prevented an illegal migration attempt to Australia by boat and detained 17 would-be asylum seekers.

The naval crew onboard ship SLNS Samudura, apprehended 17 Sri Lankans who were heading towards Australia in pre-dawn hours of Saturday, (March 05) in the seas 40 nautical miles off the Galle lighthouse.

Among the apprehended people were, a woman and two small girls and two boys. The would-be illegal migrants have left from the Negombo harbor onboard a fishing trawler on 1st March.

The Sri Lanka Navy apprehended the migrants on a tip off received by intelligence personnel.

The apprehended migrants were taken to the port of Galle and handed over to the Galle Police for onward investigations.

The Navy warned that there is no means of heading towards Australia by illegal methods as the country is very strict with regard to such migration and urged the people not to venture and lose their hard earned money based on the bogus information given by human smugglers and finally become convicts in the hands of law.

"Due to the deployment of Sri Lanka Navy's regular patrols and its strong network of intelligence it is impossible to break the shackles of the Navy and flee free," the Navy said.

http://www.colombopage.com/archive_16A/Mar05_1457191828CH.php

4. Border Force respond to sinking 'asylum' ship

Sky News

Published: 11:42 pm, Tuesday, 8 March 2016

Australian authorities have responded to an Indonesian fishing vessel in distress over the weekend, allegedly finding asylum seekers on board.

The vessel sank while assistance was being rendered. The Bangladeshi passengers, all men, were transferred to another fishing boat which returned to Indonesia.

An Indonesian police official said the passengers were all asylum seekers aged between 23 and 45 years old, and that the men claim their documents and passports were lost in the boat's drowning.

<http://www.skynews.com.au/news/top-stories/2016/03/08/border-force-respond-to-sinking--asylum--ship.html>

5. Australian Border Force denies asylum seeker boat scuttled after reports six men taken aboard ship

ABC News Online / AAP

By political reporter Dan Conifer, wires

First posted Wed 9 Mar 2016, 6:35am

Updated Wed 9 Mar 2016, 6:36am

The Australian Border Force (ABF) has denied sinking an asylum seeker boat earlier this week.

A group of six Bangladeshi men was taken aboard an Australian ship on Monday, Australian Associated Press (AAP) reported.

"Based on testimony from the captain and the crew, there were six foreign people on the boat," Indonesian police official Teddy JS Marbun told AAP.

The news agency said the asylum seekers and two Indonesian crew members were taken aboard an ABF ship before the Indonesian vessel was scuttled.

"They claimed that their documents, including their passports, were drowned along with the boat, which was drowned by the Australians," said Mr Marbun, the East Nusa Tenggara water police director.

Mr Marbun said the Australian officials then sought an Indonesian fishing boat in the area to return the group to East Nusa Tenggara province.

"Up to now, they're all still under investigation," he said.

But ABF chief Roman Quaedvlieg denied the scuttling claim.

The Federal Government did not respond to requests for further details.

Mr Marbun said the asylum seekers, all men aged between 23 and 45, said they had been in Kupang since February 13 and left a port in the country's east last Thursday.

ABF did not give them money to return to Indonesia, crew member Isai Rano told AAP.

"Before sending us back to Kupang, officers from Australian Customs gave us logistics like food, fuel and life jacket," Mr Isai said.

Mr Isai said he and his crewmate Lasuma were promised 35 million rupiah (\$AUD3,563) for taking the men to Australia.

They were given 10 million rupiah (\$AUD1,018) with the rest to be paid once they had arrived in Australia.

"I was only asked to drive the boat and so I accepted the offer because I need the money," Mr Isai said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-09/abf-denies-sinking-indonesian-asylum-seeker-boat/7232010>

6. Australian Border Force denies scuttling asylum seeker boat in Timor Sea

Indonesian police official says boat carrying six Bangladeshi men was intercepted by ABF, the men taken on Australian ship and their boat scuttled

The Guardian
Staff and agencies
Tuesday 8 March 2016 20.39 EST

The Australian Border Force has denied scuttling an asylum seeker boat, saying the vessel was unseaworthy and sank after its passengers had been removed.

According to an Indonesian police official, the boat, carrying six Bangladeshi men, was scuttled by Australian Border Force personnel in the Timor Sea.

The men, along with their two Indonesian crew, were offloaded on to a local fishing boat off the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara.

East Nusa Tenggara water police director Teddy JS Marbun said the men left the port of Tenau in Kupang on 3 March heading for Australia.

"Based on testimony from the captain and the crew, there were six foreign people on the boat," Marbun said.

He said they were intercepted by the Australian Border Force vessel on Monday. The men were then taken on board the Australian ship and their boat reportedly scuttled.

Marbun said the Australians then sought an Indonesian fishing boat in the area.

"Not far from there, there was a fisherman boat from Kupang looking for sea cucumber," Marbun said. "The boat then was asked to bring the crews and the migrants back to Kupang. Up to now, they're all still under investigation."

Marbun said the asylum seekers, all men aged between 23 and 45, said they'd been in Kupang since 13 February.

"They claimed that their documents, including their passports, were drowned along with the boat, which was drowned by the Australians," he added.

Niko, a Kupang man, prepared the boat, said Isai Rano, one of the boat's crew. He said the Bangladeshi men had bought the boat from Niko for 93 million rupiah (\$A9,492).

Isai said he and his crewmate Lasuma were promised 35m rupiah for taking the men to Australia, but Niko just gave them 10m, with the rest to be paid once they had arrived in Australia.

"They [the Bangladeshis] came to Tenau port at 1am on March 3. We're leaving at 3am. All the preparation for the trip have been prepared by Niko, like food and fuel.

"I only knew Niko for one day before leaving. I didn't know at first who bought the boat. I was only asked to drive the boat and so I accepted the offer because I need the money."

He said they did not receive any money from the Border Force to turn back.

"Before sending us back to Kupang, officers from Australian Customs gave us logistics like food, fuel and life jacket. No, they didn't give us money," Isai said.

The government has been strident in refusing to comment on "on-water matters", but ABF commissioner Roman Quaedvlieg tweeted in response to the claims: "ABF Maritime patrol assisted an Indonesian vessel in distress. Vessel was NOT scuttled – was unseaworthy & sank. Pax assisted & ok."

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/09/australian-border-force-denies-scuttling-asylum-seeker-boat-in-timor-sea>

7. Blow to Australia's \$55 million Cambodia deal as two more refugees reportedly quit

The Age
March 8, 2016 - 1:12PM
Nicole Hasham

A married Iranian couple who were once refugees at Nauru have reportedly left Cambodia and returned to their homeland despite the potential dangers, in a further sign Australia's \$55 million deal with the south-east Asian nation has failed.

News outlet Cambodia Daily has reported comments by Sok Phal, director of the Cambodian Interior Ministry's immigration department, as saying the Iranian couple had voluntarily returned to their home country.

"They [are] back already ... They wanted to return back home. You ask me why, I don't know," he reportedly said.

If the reports are correct, it means Australia has paid Cambodia \$55 million to permanently resettle just two refugees - striking a further blow to the much-maligned deal Labor leader Bill Shorten has previously described as "pathetic".

The Phnom Penh Post also reported the development, quoting director of the Interior Ministry's Refugee Department Kerm Sarin as saying the pair returned home on February 12.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton and the Department of Immigration and Border Protection have been contacted for comment.

The Turnbull government has been seeking third countries in which to settle refugees from Nauru, after Australia refused to accept them. Nauru has offered refugees only temporary resettlement.

The first group of four refugees arrived in Phnom Penh in June last year at a cost to Australia of \$15 million, on top of \$40 million in increased aid that Australia gave Cambodia to sign the agreement.

However one of those refugees returned to Myanmar. If the two Iranians have also left, it leaves just one from the original group remaining, plus another who arrived last November.

Critics say Cambodia is not a suitable place to resettle refugees because it is impoverished, has been accused of human rights abuses and has no refugee resettlement experience.

General Phal reportedly said the couple left Cambodia in either late February or early March, and he was not aware of any efforts to guarantee their safe return.

He reportedly said no other refugees on Nauru had volunteered to come to Cambodia since a Rohingya man arrived in November.

As Fairfax Media reported last week, the federal government says two gay refugees reportedly bashed at Nauru, where homosexuality is illegal, should take up the Cambodian resettlement deal.

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/blow-to-australias-55-million-cambodia-deal-as-two-more-refugees-reportedly-leave-20160308-gnda8q.html>

8. Refugee resettlement program in Cambodia an 'expensive joke' as Iranian couple return home

ABC Radio CAF - AM
By Liam Cochrane
First posted Wed 9 Mar 2016, 5:31am
Updated Wed 9 Mar 2016, 6:47am

Refugee advocates say Australia's program to resettle refugees in Cambodia is not working, after an Iranian couple decided to instead return home, leaving only two people in Australia's multi-million-dollar resettlement program.

Australia has sent more than 400 asylum seekers to Nauru, but only five took up the offer to move to Cambodia last year, a deal which included Australia offering the Cambodian Government \$40 million in aid money if it agreed to take on refugees.

A further \$15.5 million was allocated for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to handle the actual resettlement, but a statement from the organisation said they had not been paid in full.

"The IOM continues to receive funding from the Government of Australia to implement settlement services in Cambodia, but that funding has not amounted to \$15 million given the limited number of refugees arriving from Nauru to date," the statement read.

Opposition immigration spokesman Richard Marles called the situation an "expensive joke".

But the Australian Government is standing by its resettlement policy.

The un-named Iranian couple who have returned to Iran have been kept out of the spotlight since they touched down in Cambodia nine months ago, with little known about their lives in one of Asia's poorest countries.

But in February, they decided to return to Iran, a move that has only now been revealed by Cambodian officials.

And last year, another one of those five refugees, believed to be a Rohingya man, chose to return to Myanmar.

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said the Government was holding firm on its policy that if you arrive by boat you can either return to your country of origin or be resettled in a third country.

'Damage to international reputation of Australia'

Ian Rintoul, from the Refugee Action Coalition, said even for the refugees who agreed to go to Cambodia, they made it clear to him it was never going to be home.

"They all made it very clear that when they were going to Cambodia it wasn't with any intention of remaining there, it was to get away from Nauru and to have a greater prospect of actually getting somewhere where they could get secure resettlement," Mr Rintoul said.

Sister Denise Coghlan, from the Jesuit Refugee Service in Cambodia, said if the refugees who chose to return home did so because of a change in their country's political climate and a lift of economic sanctions, then that could be seen as a good sign.

"Because I think if we're going to address this whole issue of refugees at the moment, we need to address the root causes," she said.

"And definitely that sort of situation in Iran was one of the root causes for people fleeing."

But Sister Coghlan said the costs of the program go beyond just money.

"I guess if the two people that have been here stay on and make a life for themselves here, that's a success for two people," she said.

"But if you look at it in terms of the cost and the damage it's done to the international reputation of Australia, it seems to me it's been very negative."

Australia's other resettlement partner, Papua New Guinea, is understood to have resettled five men, with almost 1,000 still in detention or at a transit house on Manus Island.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-09/cambodia-refugee-resettlement-program-labelled-an-expensive-joke/7231852>

9. \$55m Cambodia deal that resettled two refugees a 'good outcome', says Dutton

The minister brushes off criticism that the resettlement scheme represents a waste of taxpayers' money

The Guardian
Australian Associated Press
Tuesday 8 March 2016 16.46 EST

The Coalition's \$55m refugee deal with Cambodia is a "pretty good outcome", immigration minister Peter Dutton has said, despite only two people resettling in the country.

Only two of five people who agreed to move from Australia's offshore detention centre on Nauru to the south east Asian country remain.

"I think that is a pretty good outcome," Peter Dutton told Nine Network on Wednesday.

Asked if the \$55m cost of the deal amounted to a waste of taxpayers' money and an expensive stopover for Australia's rejected boat arrivals, Dutton said the government was determined to crush people-smuggling operations and stop people drowning at sea.

"We have been very clear about the fact if you come to Australia by boat you will never settle here," he said.

The Cambodia deal comprises \$40m of aid and \$15m for resettlement costs.

An Iranian couple moved from Nauru to Cambodia voluntarily left the country in late February.

Another refugee, an ethnic Rohingya, went back to Myanmar (Burma) last October.

That leaves one person left in Cambodia from the original group of four resettled under the Australian program.

Opposition immigration spokesman Richard Marles said on Tuesday it's "all but over for the botched deal".

"The inability of this government to secure a meaningful resettlement arrangement with a credible third country is a serious failure."

Cambodia has indicated it's not prepared to accept any more refugees.

But Australia appears to remain committed to supporting the Cambodian government to implement settlement arrangements and is still encouraging refugees on Nauru to explore Cambodia as a resettlement option.

Refugees can elect to return to their country of origin at any time.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/09/55m-cambodia-deal-that-resettled-two-refugees-a-good-outcome-says-dutton>

10. Iranian refugee couple returns home after being transferred from Nauru to Cambodia, Peter Dutton says

ABC News Online

By political reporter Stephanie Anderson

First posted Tue 8 Mar 2016, 11:27am

Updated Tue 8 Mar 2016, 2:42pm

Two refugees transferred from Nauru to Cambodia as part of a \$55 million deal with Australia have returned home, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton says.

The departure of the Iranian husband and wife leaves one person in the country that was part of the initial group transferred from immigration detention as part of the deal.

A spokesperson for Mr Dutton confirmed their return today, saying "refugees can elect to return to their country of origin at any time, which is what an Iranian couple in Cambodia decided to do recently".

In a statement, the spokesperson said the Government remained committed to the resettlement deal with Cambodia.

"The Government holds firm on our policy that if you arrive by boat then you can either return to your country of origin or be resettled in a third country," the spokesperson said.

The couple were part of the original group of four refugees — three Iranians and an ethnic Rohingya man — who were transferred from Nauru in May 2015.

The Rohingya man returned to Myanmar late last year, with the Cambodian Government reportedly stating at the time that the man asked to go because he was homesick.

A fifth refugee was also transferred to Cambodia late last year.

But Labor's immigration spokesman Richard Marles told the ABC only one transferred refugee remained in Cambodia.

Mr Dutton's office said two remained.

Mr Marles said the plan had become "an expensive joke", which had never been a genuine option for refugees.

"It stands as the symbol for how this Government has completely failed in negotiating any third country resettlement options which are credible," he said.

"One of the problems this Government has experienced is it's turned its back on the world... It must start working with the global community and particularly the UNHCR."

Greens immigration spokesperson Sarah Hanson-Young said the Government had not got an exit plan for offshore immigration detention.

Senator Hanson-Young told the ABC the Cambodia deal was "an expensive flop".

Immigration Department not 'immoral rogue agency'

The news of the couple's departure coincide with a 1,200-word defence of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection from its Secretary Michael Pezzullo.

Mr Pezzullo hit out at misleading commentary and reporting on immigration issues, saying that some comparisons — such as those to Nazi Germany — were "highly offensive, unwarranted and plainly wrong".

"The Department and its uniformed operational arm, the Australian Border Force, does not operate beyond the law, nor is it an immoral 'rogue agency'," he said.

"While policy can be debated, there should be no place for falsehood, rumour and unfounded speculation."

Mr Pezzullo said the department shared the same goal as its critics — "to have no children at all in immigration detention, consistent with the law of the land".

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-08/refugees-returned-home-after-being-transferred-from-nauru/7230118>

11. Australia spent \$2m relocating two refugees from Nauru to Cambodia

Immigration minister Peter Dutton says \$40m of the overall \$55m deal was aid to be spent on initiatives such as crop production and landmine clearing

The Guardian
Michael Safi
Wednesday 9 March 2016 19.53 EST

The federal government has spent \$2m of the total allocated for resettlement under its \$55m Cambodia deal, which has so far succeeded in permanently relocating two refugees.

Three others subsequently left Cambodia.

The immigration minister, Peter Dutton, told radio station 2GB on Thursday that \$40m of the deal was aid money to be paid over four years and spent on initiatives such as crop production, landmine clearing and election assistance.

A further \$15m was to be paid to the International Organisation for Migration – on a fee-for-service basis, according to Dutton's office – to assist with resettlement costs including accommodation, healthcare and helping the refugees find employment.

Five people have taken up the offer of moving from Australia's offshore detention centre on Nauru to the southeast Asian country, and of that cohort just two remain.

As a result of the low take-up rate Dutton said "only \$2m has been expended so far". "And the fact we've had no drownings at sea and no successful boat arrivals I think is a pretty good outcome."

An Iranian couple who moved from Nauru to Cambodia voluntarily returned to Iran in late February. Another refugee, an ethnic Rohingya, went back to Myanmar (Burma) in October.

Labor's immigration spokesman, Richard Marles, has described the Cambodia package as a "botched deal". "The inability of this government to secure a meaningful resettlement arrangement with a credible third country is a serious failure," he said on Tuesday.

Cambodia has indicated it is not prepared to accept any more refugees. Nonetheless, Australia appears to remain committed to supporting the Cambodian government to implement settlement arrangements and is still encouraging refugees on Nauru to explore Cambodia as a resettlement option. Refugees can elect to return to their country of origin at any time.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/10/australia-spent-2m-relocating-five-refugees-from-nauru-to-cambodia>

12. Lindsay Murdoch: Remaining two refugees in Cambodia rue leaving Nauru

Sydney Morning Herald
March 13, 2016 - 2:52AM
Lindsay Murdoch

Phnom Penh: A refugee who agreed to resettle from Nauru to Cambodia under a controversial \$55 million Australian scheme says he feels abandoned and fears he will die in the impoverished country.

"I feel unwell, lonely and sad," Mohammed Roshid, a 26-year-old Rohingya Muslim, told Fairfax Media while lying on the floor of a decrepit house in a Phnom Penh suburb.

"I fear that I will die here."

Australia sent Mr Roshid to Cambodia, a country with one of the world's poorest medical services, despite his having a long history of illness, including being flown from Nauru to Brisbane for weeks-long hospital treatment in 2014.

In an exclusive interview Mr Roshid said that only three months after arriving in Cambodia his relationship with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the agency Australia paid \$15 million to take care of refugees arriving in Cambodia from Nauru, is strained.

Only two of five refugees who accepted offers of money and training to go to Cambodia remain in the country, as the agreement sealed with champagne toasts in late 2014 has collapsed in a political headache for Australia.

Mr Roshid said key promises made by Australian officials to convince him to give up hope of reaching mainland Australia remain unfulfilled, including offers of help setting up a restaurant, housing accommodation and an \$US8000 (\$10,000) cash payment.

He sleeps alone in the upstairs of an IOM office despite Australia paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to rent a luxury villa in a Phnom Penh suburb for three years.

Mr Roshid said he has so far received \$US4000 of the promised payment but that almost US\$2000 of that was stolen from him by a crooked motorcycle dealer. He said he feels discriminated against as a Rohingya Muslim in the Buddhist-majority nation.

"When I was robbed I went to a government department to complain but they told me they couldn't help me," he said.

Mr Roshid said he has been issued with a refugee identification card by Cambodian authorities but that it does not carry enough weight to allow him to buy a telephone sim card. In a blow to efforts by Australia to convince more refugees to resettle in Cambodia, Mr Roshid said he tells friends on Nauru who call him that they should not believe what Australian officials say and they should not agree to make the journey to Cambodia.

Australian officials in Nauru have conducted intense campaigns portraying Cambodia as a developing nation utopia with no violent crime, few dogs, mosques, jobs, football and martial arts, sparking fierce criticism from Cambodia's opposition MPs and human rights and refugee advocates.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton declined to comment but earlier this week defended the Cambodia deal, saying it was part of the government's success in stopping the boats.

"The fact that we've had no drownings at sea, no successful boat arrivals, I think is a pretty significant outcome," he told Sydney radio. He said under the \$55 million deal, \$40 million was aid money and \$15 million related to resettlement costs - of which only \$2 million had been spent.

Mr Roshid, who left Indonesia in a people smuggler's boat, said he suffered severe lung and kidney problems and asthma after he arrived in Nauru from Christmas Island in 2013. He said his health has been deteriorating over the past two years and that last week he fell ill and tried to reach five IOM officials by telephone, but none immediately answered.

"I was crying. I felt I was left on my own," he said.

Mohammed Yusuf, a Rohingya friend who has lived in Cambodia for eight years, said he took Mr Roshid to a hospital where a doctor recommended keeping him in a ward for a week to 10 days

"The doctor came and told me an IOM man told that staying in hospital three days was enough and that Roshid had to return to the IOM office," Mr Yusuf said. Mr Yusuf was caring for Mr Roshid at home when Fairfax Media interviewed.

The IOM paid the \$US460 hospital bill. Joe Lowry, an IOM spokesman, said the organisation cannot reply to specific questions about Mr Roshid, citing confidentiality. He said qualified IOM professionals are in daily contact with the refugees, including on an emergency basis.

Mr Roshid said that in Nauru asylum seekers and refugees can receive quick medical treatment. "If I am going to die I should have stayed in Nauru and died there," he said.

Daniel Eskandari, an Iranian in his early 20s, has also remained unemployed since he arrived in Phnom Penh from Nauru in June last year in the first group of four refugees, refugee sources say. He has also complained about broken Australian promises, along with three other refugees who have returned home to Iran and Myanmar. Officials on Nauru convinced Mr Eskandari to take a one-way ticket to Cambodia with an offer to fast-track his application for refugee status, which rates him as having a fear of persecution in Iran.

"Daniel and four other refugees from Nauru saw Cambodia as a stepping stone to somewhere else," Ian Rintoul, of the Refugee Action Coalition, said.

"They all made it very clear that when they were going to Cambodia it wasn't with any intention of remaining there, it was to get away from Nauru, and to have a greater prospect of actually getting somewhere where they could get secure resettlement."

Within hours of the approval of his application Mr Eskandari was being chaperoned in a military-style operation to one of Asia's most poorest nations.

But life in Cambodia quickly turned out to be a bitter disappointment for Mr Eskandari and the other refugees who volunteered to give the country a go, refugee advocates say. Mr Rintoul said in their first months in Cambodia the refugees were kept pretty much housebound in the rented villa.

"They were isolated, weren't given the lump-sum payment they were promised and were encouraged not to interact with community groups," he says.

"They complained about their situation."

The Australian government threw huge diplomatic resources into getting the first group to Cambodia, including posting an additional 10 people to the Australian embassy in Phnom Penh. But the agreement was widely condemned, including by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, which said refugees fleeing persecution and armed conflict deserve better than being shipped from one country to the next.

Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division, said Cambodia's strongman Hun Sen, whose corrupt regime received an additional \$50 million in aid for signing the agreement, is "laughing all the way to the bank" while the Australian government has been forced to go further afield, to places like Kazakhstan, to try to make similar deals to clear asylum seekers and refugees from Nauru and PNG's Manus Island.

"It was a classic Phnom Penh sting job on a donor, get the money upfront but don't concede the operational control over the project – and then stall or obfuscate until you get the outcome you want, which in this case was only a handful of refugees," Mr Robertson said.

Kerm Sarin, director of the Cambodian government's refugee department, said last week there are no more refugees on Nauru seeking to resettle in Cambodia.

"We are doing a humanitarian program, so whether it's successful or unsuccessful, it doesn't matter, as long as we have implemented the MoU [agreement with Australia]," he told the Phnom Penh Post.

Wiping his forehead with wet tissue, Mr Roshid said he doesn't know what his future holds because he has been told he cannot go back to Nauru.

"All sorts of things are going around in my head like I am a crazy person ... I don't feel safe," he said.

<http://www.smh.com.au/world/remaining-two-refugees-in-cambodia-rue-leaving-nauru-20160311-gnh7mo.html>

13. Gay refugees on Nauru 'prisoners' in their home as Australia prepares to celebrate Mardi Gras

The Age
March 5, 2016 - 8:03AM
Nicole Hasham

Two gay refugees who fell in love at the Nauru detention camp say they are virtually prisoners in their home: holed up in fear for their lives after being bashed and verbally abused in a nation where homosexuality is illegal.

As Sydney prepares for Saturday night's Mardi Gras parade - an event that showcases Australia as a global model of acceptance of gay and lesbian people - the federal government is refusing to rescue the two young Iranian men it sent to a country where they could be jailed for their sexual orientation, according to lawyers.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has so far refused to help the refugees, who say they have been repeatedly beaten, had rocks thrown at them and been called "human rubbish". His department says refugees at Nauru can accept resettlement in Cambodia.

The Human Rights Law Centre and international LGBT rights group All Out have begun a petition calling on Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to urgently intervene and bring the men to Australia. The refugees, known by the pseudonyms Nima and Ashkan, live in the Nauruan community. They say they spend their lives confined in a tiny unit with the doors locked and window shades drawn - leaving just once a week to buy food, escorted by a case manager.

"We would love to live in a country where we can love each other without any barriers ... and Australia is such a country," Nima told Fairfax Media through an interpreter, speaking on the phone from Nauru.

"Most of the time we just lie on the bed because we can't do anything ... we are mentally suffering. We can't do anything else."

The men, both in their 20s, fled Iran separately after suffering persecution and headed to Australia. They met after being transferred to the Nauru detention camp and their relationship began about two years ago.

They claim to have suffered harassment from other detainees while inside the centre. After being found to be refugees and moved into the Nauruan community, they say the attacks escalated.

In one alleged assault one evening in July last year, the men were walking home carrying their shopping when their path was blocked by three local men.

The refugees allege the men asked if they were partners, which they confirmed, before the men said "f**ck you" and beat them with sticks, forcing them to the ground.

The refugees said they sustained bruising and were taken to hospital. Ashkan allegedly suffered concussion and was kept overnight

In an attack the following month, Nima was allegedly punched in the head by two men on motorbikes, who yelled "you f***ing gays".

A spokesman for the Department of Immigration and Border Protection said it was "aware of an incident involving the individuals" and law enforcement in Nauru was the responsibility of the island's government.

The spokesman said concerns about the treatment of gay people are considered prior to a detainee's transfer to that country.

"It is not Australian government policy for illegal maritime arrivals to settle in Australia. Refugees in Nauru may apply to Cambodia for permanent settlement," he said.

Very few refugees have taken up the Cambodia resettlement option. Critics say that nation has been accused of human rights abuses, has high poverty levels and no refugee resettlement experience.

The Nauruan government had not provided comment at the time of writing.

HRLC's director of advocacy and litigation, Anna Brown, said under Nauruan law Ashkan and Nima risk being jailed for up to 14 years.

"This situation and similar ones on Manus [Island] are just so wrong ... the Australian government knowingly and deliberately allows gay men to be warehoused on tiny islands where they face assaults, prejudice and extremely harsh criminal penalties," she said.

The HRLC says former human rights commissioner Tim Wilson was notified of the case and raised it with the government. Mr Wilson, who recently resigned the post to launch a bid for Parliament with the Liberal Party, would not comment.

A spokesman for Connect Settlement Services, which assists refugees at Nauru, said it was aware of assault allegations "made by clients in June and July last year and we have provided assistance to those clients".

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/gay-refugees-on-nauru-prisoners-in-their-home-as-australia-prepares-to-celebrate-mardi-gras-20160304-gnam2h.html>

14. MEDIA RELEASE: Mardis Gras will highlight plight of Nauru gay refugees

Saturday March 5, 2016
Refugee Action Coalition
Ian Rintoul
mobile 0417 275 713

A 200-strong "No Pride in Detention" float and contingent in Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardis Gras will highlight the plight of Nima and Ashkan, (not their real names, photo attached) two gay refugees on Nauru.

A banner (design attached) saying "Nima and Ashkan: 'resettled' in Nauru; bashed, abused, in hiding.." will be carried on the float along with placards calling for them, and others on Nauru and Manus, to be brought to Australia.

Nima told Australian authorities when he arrived at Christmas Island in 2013 that he was gay and was fleeing persecution in Iran on the basis of his sexuality; yet the government still sent him to Nauru, where being gay is a crime, "against the order of nature", that carries a penalty of up to 14 years jail, with hard labour.

"The bottom line is that Nauru is not safe. Nima and Ashkan remain in danger. They should never have been sent to Nauru. Now they have been found to be refugees they must be given the protection and security that they need. Nima and Ashkan must be immediately brought to Australia," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

Nima and Ashkan faced harassment and abuse, in and out, of the detention centre. But in July last year they were severely assaulted in the community. Since then, the couple have been house-bound, fearful of leaving their donga.

They are escorted from their donga, once a week, to do their shopping.

"Nima and Ashkan's situation highlights the plight of the other gay refugees on Nauru and on Manus Island. In both PNG and Nauru, gay asylum seekers and refugees face persecution because being gay is against the law", said Rintoul.

"Awareness of their situation will bring even more attention of the fundamental problems with offshore processing and will add to the growing concerns for the safety of the 267 people from Manus and Nauru who are in Australia facing the possibility of being returned offshore.

"For all the asylum seekers and refugees to find safety and protection, we have to close the camps."

For more information contact Ian Rintoul 0417 275 713

Mardis Gras "No Pride in Detention": float organisers: Ed McMahon 0403 590 725; Amy Thomas 0450 767 539

15. Mardis Gras highlights persecution of gay refugees on Nauru

A float at Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardis Gras aims to draw attention to the case of two Iranian refugees beaten in alleged homophobic attacks on Nauru.

SBS News
By Phillipa Carisbrooke
5 Mar 2016

The No Pride in Detention float will be accompanied by around 200 campaigners calling for the federal government to allow the gay men known as Nima and Ashkan to settle in Australia.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is attending the parade and campaigners hope he will hear their message loud and clear.

"We want to use this platform to send a message to our parliamentarians," said float organiser Amy Thomas.

"(Nima and Ashkan) should be living here in the community, they should be in Australia walking in the Mardi Gras like us. (Nauru) is not safe for gay asylum seekers."

The men met and fell in love at Australia's offshore processing centre on Nauru.

They have been living together in the local community for a year, but a series of attacks have left them traumatised.

"They have been spat at. They have been called names," said the Director of Advocacy and Litigation and the Human Rights Law Centre, Anna Brown.

"They have been repeatedly physically beaten by the people of Nauru."

For the last 8-months the couple have only left their room under escort to buy their weekly groceries.

"We are going mad," said Nima.

"We are losing our mind. We have mental health problems."

The men were persecuted in their homeland and fled to Australia believing it was a place where they could be safely openly gay.

Instead human rights groups allege the Australian government knowingly sent them to a country where gay people face prejudice.

"And in this case knowingly sent Nima - who disclosed his homosexuality to the Australian government - to a place that criminalises homosexuality," said Anna Brown.

The LGBT rights group All Out is calling for the government to let the men settle in Australia.

"Even where they are now they can face up to 14 years in prison for who they love. And it makes a travesty of the word asylum," said Executive Director Matthew Beard.

The Department of Immigration and Border Protection has denied the couple's claim that staff told them not to hold hands or be affectionate in public.

In a statement it said it is not government policy to settle refugees who arrive by boat in Australia, and that refugees on Nauru may apply to Cambodia for permanent settlement.

<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/03/05/mardis-gras-highlights-persecution-gay-refugees-nauru>

16. Nauru government raises fee to contest upcoming election 20-fold

ABC Pacific Beat

By Michael Walsh and staff

First posted Fri 11 Mar 2016, 9:55pm

Updated Fri 11 Mar 2016, 11:10pm

The Nauru government has dramatically increased the fee for candidates wanting to run in its upcoming elections 20-fold from around \$100 to \$2,000.

The fee hike was passed by its Parliament on Thursday, and adds to recent electoral reforms that require public servants to resign from their positions three months ahead of the polls if they want to stand for election.

While other countries in the region including Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu also charge high candidate fees, suspended Nauru MP Roland Kun believes the move is aimed at reducing the competition once the election is called.

"We believe it's just to hinder people who might be contesting against ... the current Government of Nauru in the upcoming election," he told Pacific Beat.

"The Minister for Finance debated that they needed to raise the money to fund the election," Mr Kun said, adding that the requirements for funding the election were not adequately explained.

The details of the new act have yet to be released, with Nauruans and suspended MPs hearing about the changes in a local parliamentary broadcast.

Another suspended MP and former justice minister, Mathew Batsiua, told Radio New Zealand that two electoral changes announced on Thursday further undermined democracy on the island.

"One is to establish an electoral commission, and that electoral commission will basically be in charge of elections and I think that is quite reasonable. But ... we don't know the details so we will reserve judgment on that until we see the Act," he said.

"The second change is to increase the fees for candidates. And the third main change that they have put in is increasing the transfer fees for voters wishing to transfer from one electorate to another from \$10 to now \$150.

"Those increasing fees are further attacks on the rights of people to stand as candidates."

Fellow opposition MP Roland Kun said the fee rise was simply engineered to block candidates in the upcoming election.

"A lot of prospective candidates will not be able to afford that kind of fee on the Nauruan salary," he said.

Other recent changes passed by Parliament included a new rule that anyone holding a public service job had to resign from their post three months before an election. An election must be held in Nauru by mid-year.

"Some individuals have already resigned from their jobs, so they won't be working for three months, and ... a lot of those people will not be able to afford that fee," Mr Kun said.

Five opposition MPs, including Mr Kun and Mr Batsiua, have been suspended from parliament for nearly two years for criticising the Government and speaking with foreign media, including the ABC.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-12/nauru-government-raises-fee-to-contest-upcoming-election-20-fold/7241808>

17. Mardi Gras parade threatened to ban refugee advocates if they harassed Bill Shorten

Video filmed by No Pride in Detention activist shows the parade producer warning a float organiser after a protest at the Labor leader's media conference

The Guardian
Paul Karp and Helen Davidson
Sunday 6 March 2016 23.05 EST

Mardi Gras organisers threatened to ban refugee advocates from Saturday's parade if they "harassed" or "said something" to the Labor leader, Bill Shorten.

A video filmed by a No Pride in Detention participant shows the parade producer, Anthony Russell, issuing the threat to a float organiser, Ed McMahon.

The encounter followed a protest by the No Pride in Detention participants at the conclusion of a media conference by the opposition leader and his deputy, Tanya Plibersek, half an hour before the parade's scheduled start.

Russell, in charge of the parade, said: "If I bring Bill Shorten out here now and one of you people say something to him, you are not in the fucking parade. Do you understand that?"

"So have a chat to your people, you talk to your people right now, OK. You've got one more chance. If you don't, if you can't act like a normal human being – all in the parade together – then you're out."

When McMahon tried to interject, Russell replied: "I don't care, don't harass people," leaning in towards his face. McMahon asks Russell his name, to which he replies "It's Anthony Russell, I'm the producer of the parade, yeah I can do it," and walks away.

As Shorten and Plibersek finished speaking earlier, the refugee advocates shouted: "We're here, we're queer, refugees are welcome here." The Labor leaders then weaved their way through the crowd, away from the protesters.

After the media conference the parade order was changed, separating the Rainbow Labor and No Pride in Detention floats, which had been scheduled to appear one after the other.

Instead, several floats were interposed between the pair, including Bronnie Takes a Ride, depicting Bronwyn Bishop in a helicopter, and DIY Rainbow, featuring the Sydney signboard activist Danny Lim. The two floats were originally to appear before Rainbow Labor and after No Pride in Detention respectively.

A No Pride float organiser, Amy Thomas, told Guardian Australia the suggestion the float could be removed was "completely unacceptable to us". "The compromise was that we would let others go in front of us," she said.

"The marshals were made to hold us back while a couple of floats which came from further along Oxford Street went ahead of us ... Obviously they wanted to avoid the embarrassment of the hypocrisy of Bill Shorten and the Labor party's position on offshore processing."

Thomas said she was disappointed in the event organisers. "The origins of Mardi Gras were a protest for gay rights and it's long been a venue for that," she said.

"It is a situation where you have LGBTIQI refugees on Nauru and Manus Island in PNG and in both countries homosexuality is illegal and subject to years of imprisonment. [Both parties] know they're placing people in that situation. You can't march on the streets again homophobia and not be questioned on what I say is a selective view on homophobia."

The Mardi Gras chief executive, Michele Bauer, told Guardian Australia the New South Wales police had reported "an unacceptable level of harassment and offensive comments from the No Pride in Detention float members being directed towards members of the Rainbow Labor float", including Shorten and Plibersek.

"The level of harassment reported to parade officials, just prior to 12,500 people commencing to march along Oxford Street, meant that tensions were understandably high," she said.

"The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras strongly believe the No Pride in Detention Float has a very important message to send, and without wanting the police to intervene and remove the float from the parade, a last-minute decision to reshuffle the run order was made," she said.

"At the time, this was considered the best course of action to ensure both parties were able to march and spread their individual messages to the world while maintaining safety for all marchers."

Guardian Australia has contacted Shorten's office for comment.

This year's parade was a bipartisan affair, featuring Shorten marching and Malcolm Turnbull as a spectator, the first time the federal leader of one of the two major parties has marched and the first time a sitting prime minister has attended.

A snap poll of 600 respondents by the polling startup Metapoll found more people were more likely to vote for the Liberal party as the result of Turnbull's attendance (17%) than were less likely to (10%). But most said his decision had no impact on their vote (73%).

The poll found young people between 18 and 24 were particularly in favour of the appearance, with 22% saying it made them more likely to vote Liberal and only 5% saying less likely. By contrast, respondents over 45 were less likely to vote Liberal (19%) than more likely (14%) as a result.

The poll also revealed a gender difference in attitudes, with equal numbers of men favouring the appearance as those opposed (13% each) compared with women, among whom 20% were for and 7% against.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/07/mardi-gras-parade-threatened-to-ban-refugee-advocates-if-they-harassed-bill-shorten>

18. Papua New Guinea Prime Minister calls for Australia to eventually close Manus Island centre

ABC News Online
Pacific Beat

By political reporter Stephanie Anderson and Pacific Beat's Bruce Hill
Posted Thu 3 Mar 2016, 2:42pm

Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister has clarified comments he made at Australia's National Press Club that he wants the Manus Island regional processing centre to eventually close.

Peter O'Neill told the ABC's Pacific Beat program following his Canberra address that the decision needs to be made by Australia.

"No, I did not say I want the Manus centre closed, I said that it is up to the Australian Government, that it is their call, that is their responsibility. But I stated that we cannot hold the refugees there forever," he said.

"We need to process them, we need to resettle them, we need to move them back to their country of origin if they are not genuine refugees, but we cannot hold them there forever."

Earlier, Mr O'Neill told the National Press Club in Canberra the centre should close in the future.

"At some stage, of course, we need to close the centre," he said.

Mr O'Neill said the Australia-funded regional processing centre, currently home to 916 male asylum seekers, had "done a lot more damage for Papua New Guinea than anything else".

He told Pacific Beat the detention centre had harmed the country's reputation.

"Some of our communities have been unfairly displayed as being a lawless society, a society where you cannot live," he said.

"We've been living for thousands of years freely and peacefully. Those kinds of comments do not fare well with our communities in Papua New Guinea."

Mr O'Neill described the centre to the Canberra press gallery as an inherited problem, and said questions remained around the costs of resettling refugees.

"We have issues about the cost of the resettlement, who is going to pay for it," he said.

"Certainly, the (PNG) Government does not have the resources to resettle the refugees as required, but we will play our role."

O'Neill denies issues with law and order at centre

Mr O'Neill was also questioned by the press gallery about the allegations of sexual assault at the centre, which were detailed in Senate estimates last year.

Immigration staff told a Senate committee that from March 24, 2014, to September 29, 2015, the regional processing centre recorded 14 sexual assaults, 213 physical assaults and 798 occurrences of abusive and/or aggressive behaviour.

At the time, none of the 14 cases of sexual assault reported had led to a prosecution.

Mr O'Neill today denied any issues with law and order, saying that people on the island were being "well looked after".

"Arriving there one day and seeing only 10 policemen does not necessarily mean we have a law and order problem," he said.

His address followed reports of a blow-out in both the cost of running the centres and the average detention period of asylum seekers.

Australian Government figures issued earlier this year showed the average number of days spent in immigration detention — both offshore and in Australia — had hit a record 446 days.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-03/png-pm-calls-for-manus-island-centre-eventual-closure/7217774>

19. Papua New Guinea lacks resources to resettle all Manus Island refugees, warns PM

Peter O'Neill calls Australian-run detention centre a 'problem' that had harmed his country's reputation, but refrains from calling for the facility to shut

The Guardian
Shalailah Medhora
Thursday 3 March 2016 01.40 EST

Papua New Guinea does not have the resources to resettle the 916 refugees and asylum seekers currently in the Australian-run Manus Island detention facility, the country's prime minister, Peter O'Neill, has warned.

O'Neill addressed journalists at the National Press Club in Canberra on Thursday, answering questions on a wide array of subjects, including the controversial detention centre.

He flagged that there are a number of issues to resolve before the resettlement of refugees can take place.

"Who is going to pay for it? Certainly the PNG government does not have the resources to resettle the refugees," he said. "We are also reassessing the numbers who are supposed to be resettled."

Prior to the 2013 federal election, the then prime minister, Kevin Rudd, finalised a deal with the PNG government to resettle refugees who had intended to come to Australia. The two-page agreement offers few details on how many people will be resettled or how long the Manus Island detention centre will remain open.

So far it is believed that only six refugees have been resettled in the country. The Australian Department of Immigration would not disclose the exact number and said it was a matter for the PNG government.

O'Neill has previously stated that not all the refugees in Manus will be resettled in PNG, and that other Pacific Islands need to share the burden.

On Thursday, he said he expected the numbers in the centre to fall as PNG sends back asylum seekers whose refugee claims have been denied.

The prime minister referred to the centre as a "problem that I inherited from the previous government" and insisted it had harmed PNG's reputation.

"It has done a lot more damage than probably anything else. Our communities have been accused of many things," he said. "Manus has some of the loveliest people in the world. If you go there you will find some of the friendliest people in Papua New Guinea."

“Arriving there one day and seeing 10 policemen does not necessarily mean we have a law and order problem. The community itself is resilient enough to maintain law and order and live in a peaceful environment for our citizens.”

But he refrained from calling for the centre to shut down.

“I believe it is up to the Australian government whether they close down the refugee centre or not. It is not a decision we will make for them,” O’Neill said. “At some stage of course we need to close the centre. These people cannot remain in Manus forever.”

Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young said the government did not have an “exit strategy” for Manus Island.

“Clearly prime minister O’Neill is sick of his country being used by the Liberal government in this way and it’s time to shut the Manus Island camp down,” she said. “The Liberal government has no idea how to get out of its offshore detention mess and that is very concerning.”

O’Neill said Australian contractors working in the detention centre who have been accused of crimes should face up to the PNG judicial system.

“They must be investigated and prosecuted according to PNG law ... They should be allowed to face the law in PNG.” he said. “Some have been taken out of the country without the knowledge of the authorities on the ground. And these are some of the management issues that we need to overcome, and I believe that, it doesn’t matter who you are, you need to be held accountable for your actions.”

In July last year, three Wilson security guards were flown out of PNG following a rape allegation.

O’Neill was also asked about allegations of fraud made against him that resulted in a 2014 arrest warrant. The allegations centre around a document that bears what looks like O’Neill’s signature, and allows a PNG law firm to recoup million of dollars of government money.

O’Neill said the documents were forged, and that the forgery was politically motivated.

“This is about a legal case where the lawyer concerned has been employed by the previous government. He was not engaged by our government,” he said. “Show me where I have received one toea, one kina [local currency], and I will resign tomorrow. You don’t necessarily have to put the country through such stress. But nobody has been able to do so.”

The legal action is a way of changing the government through the court system, O’Neill said.

The prime minister dismissed claims of widespread corruption in PNG politics, saying parliamentarians are barely scraping by.

“More than 90% of them today who either left office or are in office, are struggling to even pay their own bills. So this notion that there is great wealth that has been acquired by PNG politicians is just ridiculous,” he said.

Despite the lack of corruption O’Neill claims exists, his government plans to create anti-corruption body similar to Australia’s Independent Commission Against Corruption.

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/03/papua-new-guinea-lacks-resources-to-resettle-all-manus-island-refugees-warns-pm>

20. PNG Prime Minister Peter O’Neill calls Manus Island refugee centre a "problem" that should end

The Age
March 3, 2016 - 5:01PM
Nicole Hasham

The Manus Island detention centre is a "problem" that has done more damage to Papua New Guinea's reputation than any other factor, the nation's Prime Minister Peter O’Neill says, saying the facility must eventually close.

Speaking at the National Press Club in Canberra on Thursday, Mr O’Neill also said his government could not afford to resettle those found to be genuine refugees, fuelling concern that vulnerable men on the island will continue to languish with an uncertain future.

The Turnbull government is responsible for meeting the costs of detention and resettlement at the Manus Island facility, which houses single men.

As Fairfax Media reported last month, more than 60 refugees live in limbo at the Manus Island transit centre at Lorengau, while more than 900 are in their third year at the detention centre. More than half of those in detention have been found to be refugees.

Mr O'Neill said the refugee centre was "a problem" he inherited from the former PNG government.

"We have issues about cost of the resettlement, who is going to pay for it," he said.

"Certainly [the] Papua New Guinea government does not have the resources to resettle the refugees as required but we will play our role in making sure ... those who've got the skills and are able to work can be allowed to work in our communities."

As previously reported, one of the first refugees to be resettled in PNG, in the city of Lae, pleaded to be returned to Manus Island, saying life in limbo was better than his new life of fear, loneliness and poverty.

Asked about the effect of the detention facility on his country's international standing, Mr O'Neill said it had "done a lot more damage for PNG than anything else" and his communities "have been accused of many things".

There have been reports of refugees and asylum seekers at Manus Island being threatened by locals outside the centre, and others have questioned the suitability of settling refugees in PNG, which suffers high levels of violence.

Mr O'Neill said refugees at Manus Island "have been well looked-after".

"Most of them are engaging very well with our communities in Manus. Manus has some of the loveliest people in the world," he said.

He added that the centre should eventually be shut down.

"At some stage of course we need to close the centre, these people cannot remain in Manus forever. We need to make a determination where they should go."

The Turnbull government has refused to accept refugees from Manus Island and Nauru, and very few refugees have taken up the offer of resettlement in Cambodia.

Australia is reportedly in negotiations with Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia to resettle refugees in those nations.

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton sought to blame Mr O'Neill's sentiments on unsympathetic media and those hostile to the government's asylum seeker stance.

"PNG and Nauru have been unfairly vilified by advocates, including by some parts of the media, because of their opposition to our secure borders policy. It is unfair and the targeting of our regional partners should stop," he said.

The PNG government dragged its feet on developing a resettlement policy, prompting previous accusations from Labor that the Australian government had mismanaged the important bilateral relationship and failed to actively engage with the nation.

Greens immigration spokeswoman Sarah Hanson-Young said on Thursday the Manus Island centre should be shut down, and the Turnbull government "has no exit strategy" from offshore detention.

"Clearly Prime Minister O'Neill is sick of his country being used by the Liberal Government in this way ...the Liberal Government has no idea how to get out of its offshore detention mess and that is very concerning," she said.

She called for a "fair and efficient regional system" to quickly process asylum claims, and for refugees to be brought to Australia.

The debate came as Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announced her government would expand its diplomatic presence in PNG by establishing an Australian consulate-general in Lae, the nation's commercial capital.

It would "bolster the growing trade and investment relationship between the two countries" and support the delivery of Australia's \$554.5 million aid investment in PNG.

Ms Bishop said it followed positive discussions at the Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum, where "we agreed on a concrete plan to strengthen our bilateral relationship".

<http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/png-prime-minister-peter-oneill-calls-manus-island-refugee-centre-a-problem-that-should-end-20160303-gn9l1n.html>

21. Peter Dutton ignores plea to release woman, 70, from detention

Advocates say the immigration minister's silence over a request to release the Iranian woman shows the system of discretionary ministerial power is flawed

The Guardian
Helen Davidson in Darwin
Wednesday 2 March 2016 14.00 EST

Peter Dutton, the federal immigration minister, has ignored pleas to release a 70-year-old woman from three years of immigration detention, which advocates say shows that the system of discretionary ministerial powers is unjust.

The elderly Iranian, who is the oldest woman in immigration detention, is currently in Darwin's Wickham Point after she was transferred from Nauru with her two adult children. She has physical and psychological health problems, including "detention fatigue", according to doctors and her family.

In September last year refugee caseworkers wrote to Dutton, requesting the family be given bridging visas and released into the community. The letter included persecution claims and details of the mother's medical issues as part of its case for Dutton to use his ministerial discretion.

"The frequency and scope of her health conditions are such that she cannot be properly cared for in detention," it said.

There has been no response from the minister or his office, which Daniel Webb of the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC) said highlights the problem with the current powers, which do not compel the minister to decide.

"The minister holds the key. He is the only one with the power to release her," Webb told Guardian Australia.

"Leaving the basic liberty of so many people in the hands of one politician is an absolute recipe for injustice. Decisions about the basic rights of vulnerable people should be made on the basis of principle, not politics"

The minister's power of discretion under the federal Migration Act, is non-compellable and not subject to any review, said Webb. It depends on the wishes of the individual minister of the day.

His discretionary action – or a decision to take no action – cannot be appealed through the judiciary.

"This family has been locked up for almost three years. I think about my own life – what I was doing three years ago and all the things that have happened since," said Webb.

"It's so incredibly sad and fundamentally unjust that, for every minute of every one of those days, a 70 year-old woman who came here seeking our help has been locked up behind a fence."

Dutton's office has been contacted for comment.

The family sought asylum in Australia by boat but arrived on Christmas Island just hours after the Rudd Labor government ruled no one who did so would settle in Australia. They have since spent three years in detention, including some months of separation when the son was "mistakenly" sent to Manus Island on his own.

The son told Guardian Australia he didn't want his mother to "spend her last days of life behind the fences."

"My main concern is probably the immigration office or the Australian government has forgotten my mum completely," he said. "I think now it's really enough for a 70-year-old lady to be detained in a detention centre for three years. I don't want to lose my mum in detention centre. I don't want her to die here."

They are among the 267 asylum seekers currently in Australia who are facing deportation back to Manus Island and Nauru, including 37 babies born in Australia. Doctors, advocates, and several state or territory leaders have called for the children and their families to be allowed to stay in the Australian community.

On Wednesday the Greens introduced a bill to the Senate that would force the government to transfer families with children into the community after a maximum 30 days in detention.

"The Greens want to see a fair and efficient system put in place to process people's claims for asylum and bring them here safely," said senator Sarah Hanson-Young.

"This Bill will protect the children in Australia and on Nauru. It's high time the government stopped locking up children and I appeal to my Senate colleagues to back this essential reform."

The bill would also require the immediate return of any child held in offshore processing centres.

"There are children in our detention centres who have never known a day of freedom in their lives – kids who have taken their first steps and spoken their first words behind detention centre fences," Webb said.

"Regardless of whether you are a newborn baby or a 70-year-old woman, our blunt and arbitrary system locks you up until the minister personally decides to let you out. That is a sure recipe for injustice and suffering."

<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/03/peter-dutton-ignores-plea-to-release-woman-70-from-detention>

22. Sri Lankan girl with Down syndrome reunited with family in WA after visa granted

ABC News Online

Posted Thu 10 Mar 2016, 4:24pm

A nine-year-old Sri Lankan girl denied an Australian visa because she has Down syndrome has been reunited with her family in Western Australia.

Eliza Fonseka's father moved to Shark Bay last year after he and his wife, Shanoline, were granted temporary visas to work at a Christian crisis centre.

Mrs Foneska stayed behind in Sri Lanka after their daughter's visa was rejected by the Immigration Department who said she was considered to be a "significant cost to the Australian community in the areas of health care".

That decision caused outrage in disability advocacy circles.

After fighting for 11 months, last month Immigration Minister Peter Dutton intervened and granted the girl's visa.

The family have now reunited and travelled to Geraldton, where most of their extended family already live.

"I would say we are the most happiest parents in the world right now," said Mr Fonseka.

"Thank God for everything ... finally my family is back together."

Family 'looking forward to a great future'

Mrs Fonseka said she was excited about the family's future together.

"It has been so nice to see my family again because we've been separated for so long," she said.

"All of my family members — my brothers, my sisters, my mum, my nan — they're all here, so I'm glad and very happy and overjoyed to be here."

It is Mrs Fonseka and Eliza's first time in Australia.

Mrs Fonseka said she already loved WA and Eliza was adapting quickly.

"I'm very happy and excited to experience more and more things," she said.

"I'm looking forward to a great future."

The family were keen to thank all who backed their cause, including Cricket Australia.

They plan to move to Shark Bay in the coming weeks to carry out their missionary work.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-10/sri-lankan-girl-reunited-with-family-after-visa-granted/7238198>

23. Military camp ethos prevails in a Maribyrnong detention centre run on fear

The Age

February 29, 2016

Neelima Choahan

Detainees at Maribyrnong's immigration detention centre are being treated like criminals in prison-like conditions ever since Australian Border Force took over the running of the centre, it is alleged.

A source who has been inside the centre has detailed to Fairfax Media how riot gear is being kept in a room nicknamed "the dungeon" by staff, while a more "high handed" approach to running the centre has led to a more volatile atmosphere.

"We have never seen anything like this before," he said.

"That dungeon of high security equipment is opposite the senior operation manager's office. [It has] face shields, handcuffs, flexicuffs, face masks, body vests. [It] is actually in a room that the senior operation manager ... got designed and it is right outside his office."

He said many of the management were ex-prison officers from Scotland who had introduced new measures including daily lockdowns at the centre, home to both non-Australian citizens facing deportation because of criminal convictions, and asylum-seekers.

He said the centre's residents were kept segregated into six zones with one zone for women and another a "management unit" where detainees were kept in isolation for "any perceived breach of centre regulations".

"[The] lockdown experiment started a year ago and since then [violent] incidents have escalated," he said.

"The centre is in lockdown after 8pm, [so there is] no free movement or access between zones after 8.30 at night."

The source said out of 24 hours, the residents were only allowed "two hours maximum" to access meals and gym outside their zones.

"Earlier there was an aspect of welfare; at the moment it is correction," he said.

Australian Border Force took over the management of the centre in July 2015, at the same time as the Department of Immigration and Border Protection merged with the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service.

The day-to-day running of Maribyrnong falls to Serco, a private security firm that has contracts at a number of detention centres.

A Department of Immigration and Border Protection spokesman said Border Force had a "more active role" in all levels of management, with the government agency directing "day-to-day operations" and "working directly with service providers" to ensure the facility was "safe and secure".

The Department's spokesman said the detention centre's population was changing with more "high risk detainees" prompting the government to "implement a range of controls to mitigate any violent or criminal behaviour".

He said this included the separation of detainees and "certain cohorts" and "controlled movements" within the centre.

"The Department is committed to the good order of the detention network, and will continue to work with Serco to ensure that Australia's immigration detention facilities are as safe and secure as we can make them," he said.

"This includes ensuring that appropriately trained Serco officers have access to safety and security equipment, including personal protective equipment."

As Fairfax Media revealed in January, Maribyrnong detention centre has a higher incidence of use of restrains and handcuffs than at any other detention facility under the control of the federal government.

The source said the staff were increasingly being forced to act like prison officers, despite being hired as client service officers.

"There are a lot of people who have got a lot of issues with the kind of work they have to do," he said.

"Staff are always on edge."

He said close to one-third of the staff had been on stress leave in the past year, with some returning to administrative and light duties work since.

Broken security infrastructure and caring for mentally ill patients also increased the pressure on staff, he said.

Confidential documents seen by Fairfax Media reveal that over a three-week period in July 2015, many of the centre's cameras and alarms were faulty, despite repeated complaints to Serco management.

In one instance, as many as 82 of the 135 cameras were not working over a 24-hour period, with 67 cameras not recording, and 15 not connected in the day. During the night, 71 cameras were not recording and 13 were not connected.

One of the entries by an officer states that it was discovered the camera was not recording "after an attempted escape".

The logs also show that on three separate occasions, two detainees who were on a "high imminent" suicide watch were kept in a room with no cameras to monitor them.

The source said there was also a lack of adequate care for mentally ill detainees at the centre.

"If somebody is on a suicide watch ...they have people observing them ... but there is no medical staff looking after them."

The Department's spokesman would not say how many of the staff had been on stress leave in the past three years; however, he said, staff had access to free counselling services.

The spokesman said the Department took very seriously "its duty of care" towards the detainees and provided them with medical and mental health services "equal to, or above" those available to Australians. This included "constant person-to-person supervision" for those at risk of self-harm.

He said all cameras and alarms were checked daily and maintained monthly, quarterly and annually, with set timeframes for contractors to carry out any repairs. He said all the cameras and alarms were working as at February 23.

United Voice Victorian Secretary Jess Walsh said stress levels at Maribyrnong amongst detention officers were rising.

Ms Walsh urged national Serco management to step in and provide support.

Refugee advocate Pamela Curr said security at the Maribyrnong centre was getting "tighter and tighter" incrementally since the ABF took over.

"The Border Force arrive on duty in the morning and people tell me that they stride around both MITA [Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation] and MIDC [Maribyrnong] as a show of force – every day in their uniforms," Ms Curr said.

"The staff are all scared, absolutely petrified. They are constantly looking over their shoulder [for fear] of being caught out, breaking some rule.

"The guys who have been there a long time say 'I use to live in a detention centre [but] now I live in a military camp'."

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/military-camp-ethos-prevails-in-a-maribyrnong-detention-centre-run-on-fear-20160211-gms2y2.html>