

## **Extended Hard News Story**

**By Rafael Gerster**

There must be political will to change the Coalition's recent indefinite detention policy in order to protect human rights of refugees, according to legal director of Human Rights Law Centre David Burke in a forum last night.

Burke said the laws were "passed last May" as "an attempt to prevent the release of refugees" with the "outcome that they will sit in detention for years on end".

"The incredibly broad power of the government to lock people up is constant to the point where this repressive, unjust system is normalized," he said.

A key problem with the creation of the laws was "the fact that they were rushed through without any of the usual review processes", according to Burke.

"The laws were pushed through without any real debate, which was a problematic process for laws that take away refugees' fundamental liberties," he said.

Burke said changes to these refugee laws would be more likely if there was less focus on legal cases and a greater push for political change.

There should be a "political determination and incentive" to persuade the government to "revisit these laws", according to Burke.

"Changes could come as a result of the wave of people who make this issue more visible," he said.

There must be a "push" for a human rights charter and human rights protections "so that we don't rely on this legal scrape", according to Burke.

"Lawyers will continue to do what they need to do but we need a change to the law in the refugee space and more broadly in the human rights space," Burke said.

Refugees in detention never received enough support, according to Pamela Curr, refugee advocate and former campaign coordinator of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.

People sent to detention centers "have been cruelly and brutally treated", according to Curr.

"There are now 13 deaths offshore, young men being beaten by guards, and people who have been rotting in detention for nine years," she said.

The Coalition's indefinite detention laws reflected its complacency "towards the treatment of the 'other'" and showed "there is a stream of racism among the government", according to Curr.

"If the government isn't racist, they have a lot to answer for families who have their spirits killed when they arrive by boat," she said.

The mistreatment of these people "would not have been the same to white South Africans if they were seeking protection", according to Curr.

The coronavirus pandemic could create even more problems for refugees detained indefinitely, according to Curr.

"I am amazed that covid hasn't been getting in detention centers, but it has been stopped by the most punitive measures," Curr said.

Refugees “are restricted from going out”, “confined in small compounds” and “stopped from knowing what’s going on in other compounds”, according to Curr.

Curr said more Australians should participate in protests as a solution to indefinite detention.

Protesting could be “valuable to creating the fire which produces the congregation and change”, according to Curr.

“Things like standing in front of the Park Hotel might not influence politicians but they may give confidence to the people locked inside,” she said.

So “actions on the street” could give “more hope and courage for people to continue”, according to Curr.

Protests could play a major part in securing human rights of refugees, according to Chris Breen, school teacher and member of Refugee Action Collective.

Breen said there was evidence to suggest protesting could have an impact “as long as you’re a force that won’t go away”.

The Refugee Action Collective’s “protests after protests” eventually gained enough support to “turn the wheels” of charity organizations which started a ‘Kids off Nauru’ campaign, according to Breen.

Breen said he and 300 school teachers “walked off work” for a demonstration and ultimately achieved their aim to “get children and families out of Nauru”.

But activism must be ongoing to ensure more issues facing refugees detained indefinitely could be addressed, according to Breen.

Breen said he and the Refugee Action Collective “are still trying to get their message out to unions” and “have debates within the Labor Party” to address indefinite detention laws.

“While we have had small victories along the way, the efforts to change government responses to the refugee crisis is an ongoing battle,” he said.

There must be serious concerns raised about the mental health of refugees detained indefinitely, according to Breen.

300 refugees “are still held offshore” and they “are held in conditions that are designed to break people”, according to Breen.

“Over 50 per cent of people held in Nauru have serious diagnosable mental health conditions, so there’s resignation syndrome with people just giving up,” he said.

#### **Contacts for Helplines:**

**Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture:** (03) 9388 0022

**Asylum Seeker Resource Centre:** (03) 9326 6066

**Monash Health- Refugee Health Service:** 9792 8100

**Refugee Council of Australia:** (02) 9211 9333

**Foundation House:** (03) 9389 8900

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