

No care and no fresh air: inhumane conditions in Australia's hotel prisons



END INDEFINITE DETENTION – FREE THE MEDEVAC REFUGEES

Since 2012, successive Australian governments have exiled thousands of asylum-seekers and refugees to detention centres in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru. Even as they have militarised the waters north of Australia to turn asylum-seeker boats back to danger, they have cruelly and needlessly kept hundreds of individuals in limbo, in unhealthy and unsafe conditions, in contravention of human rights and basic dignity.

Now, the government has recreated the nastiness of these offshore camps right in the middle of Australian cities. It is hoping that no one will notice, but the lives of those locked up depend on us paying attention.

Who is in the hotels?

As of 1 June 2020, there are 65 men being held in the Mantra Bell City Hotel in Melbourne, 108 men in Kangaroo Point Hotel in Brisbane and 11 men and women in the Mecure Hotel in Darwin. There are also 46 people from offshore in MITA and 2 people in BITA. Many of them have been trapped in the hotels for months. [The first group of men arrived at the Mantra in July 2019](#). Prior to this they spent 6 years in detention in PNG and Nauru, having reached Australia after a government ruling (in July 2013) that people who applied for asylum after arriving via boat would never be settled here.

While others who came at the same time as them are now, despite that ruling, making their lives in Australia or elsewhere, these people and the hundreds more still on PNG and Nauru have been arbitrarily denied their freedom. Some of the refugees have family living in Australia, some were teenagers when they were locked up offshore, all of them have the right to live their lives in peace and safety.



Why are they there?

They were amongst those [brought to Australia for medical treatment under the Medevac law](#) in 2019. That means an independent panel of medical professionals determined that their health required treatment that could not be obtained in PNG or Nauru, where medical systems are far inferior to what is available in Australia. It is not clear [why the government put them in particular in the hotels](#) when other men, women and children who came to Australia for medical treatment are in community detention, albeit [in precarious situations and dealing with the impacts of trauma and years in detention](#).

It is important to understand that detention itself is a major cause of mental and physical health problems: in addition to the dangerous conditions and inadequate care, to be trapped in detention for an unknown and possibly indefinite period causes enormous suffering. The threat of COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health problems as refugees in detention are unable to protect themselves. Many have underlying health conditions that make them vulnerable, from diabetes to kidney disease.

Have they received medical treatment?

Often no. Many refugees and asylum-seekers who came to Australia under Medevac have reported that they are not receiving the care for which they were evacuated. Instead of specialist diagnosis and treatment, they have reported receiving only general consultations. The government has now overturned the law, and the future of the refugees and asylum-seekers in detention is entirely uncertain.

Why are they in hotels?

Under Australia's migration law, hotels and other sites can be designated as an "alternative place of detention" (APOD). In theory, APODs have fewer restrictive security measures than detention facilities and are more likely to be used for short stays. In practice, [APODs have been used for long periods](#)

and some places designated as APODs are indistinguishable from regular detention facilities (such as on Christmas Island).

The use of commercial hotels reflects another key aspect of our asylum system: expensive, private contracting. Offshore processing, onshore mandatory detention, and boat turnbacks are estimated to have [cost taxpayers at least \\$9.6 billion in 2013-16 alone](#).

What are conditions like?

In the Mantra, the refugees are all in one floor of the hotel. They share rooms. They have meals in the hotel. There is no outdoor space. There is no access to fresh air—while once they could apply to be taken to MITA detention facility to be briefly outside (behind fences), since the COVID-19 pandemic even that is no longer possible. They often spend 23 hours a day locked in their rooms. They are also [no longer able to have visitors](#).

What are the health risks?

These are obviously extremely damaging conditions to live in. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic people in immigration detention have faced even greater threats to their safety. They cannot practise social distancing, they do not have reliable access to soap or sanitiser, and—in addition to guests and staff using the hotel grounds—Serco guards rotate frequently (around 90 a day at Kangaroo Point, for example), increasing the risk of infection. The resulting, well-founded anxiety compounds the strain and trauma of years lost in detention.

The Australian Human Rights Commissioner, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the

World Health Organization, and the International Committee of the Red Cross have all highlighted health risks for people in detention. But more countries have released convicted criminals from prison to reduce the threat of COVID-19 than have released people from immigration detention.

Almost [1,200 Australian doctors have called for refugees and asylum-seekers to be released into the community](#), stating that “Conditions in the detention centres, and even more so, in the hotels being used as Alternate Places of Detention, constitute a very high-risk environment for detainees’ mental and physical health.”



It is legal to seek asylum and the refugees and asylum-seekers in Australia’s detention centres have committed no crime, yet they remain imprisoned in conditions that are guaranteed to cause harm. Nearly everyone flown here for medical care before the Medevac law was placed in community detention. The costly cruelty of locking up the Medevac refugees in private sector APODs is indefensible.

What can I do?

Get involved!

Refugee Action Collective (RAC) is a democratic, grass root collective representing a broad cross-section of the community and is a member of Refugee Advocacy Network. New members are always welcome. RAC meets every Monday at 6.30pm, see [our website](#) for details, including Zoom link. RAC also organises protests at the Mantra hotel and elsewhere. Join our mailing list: <http://racvic.org/subscribe>

Raise your voice!

Contact the Prime Minister, the Home Affairs Minister, or your federal MP about the national policies. Contact the Premier, your state MP, or the local councils about your concerns. You can also contact the hotels, or review them online to raise awareness that they are operating as sites of detention.

Sign the petition to [remove people from the threat of COVID-19 in immigration detention centres](#) (search “immigration #SaferAtHome” on change.org).

Sign the petition to [Dan Andrews to drop the fines against protesters and to help bring refugees to safety](#) (search “car protests are safe, detention centres are not” via google).

Join the boycott!

Mantra Hotels and the Central Apartment Group have sites around the country. Mantra and Mercure are owned by Accor Live Limitless (ALL), which also owns Ibis, Novotel and Sofitel and more.