

Suicide Threat By 9 Refugees Held in Camp By Australia

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Body

Nine teenage Afghans seeking asylum are threatening to kill themselves unless they are freed from a **camp** where hundreds of illegal immigrants have been on a hunger strike for two weeks to protest their detention.

The **threats** have prompted a government delegation to make its third visit in about a week to the isolated **camp**, on the desert plains of South **Australia**, to discuss the immigrants' demands.

The immigrants are protesting the conditions at the **camp**, called Woomera, and the government's policy of detaining all illegal immigrants while their applications for asylum wind through the bureaucracy, which can take years. In the past week, detainees at other centers across **Australia** have joined the protests.

Some have sewn their mouths shut and refused to eat. Others have harmed themselves by swallowing chemicals or cutting their wrists and stomachs. Several have tried to hang themselves, the government has confirmed.

The nine boys who threatened **suicide** said they would wait 24 hours while government negotiators met with them and the other protesters. Most are from the Middle East and Asia.

"They're terribly adamant about it," said Robert McDonald, a lawyer for the teenagers. "I'm sure they will follow through."

Hassan Varasi, an Afghan asylum seeker who is acting as spokesman for hundreds of detainees from inside the **camp**, said most hunger strikers had cut the threads from their mouths to show a willingness to negotiate.

"There is a sign of hope," he said.

The talks started Tuesday night and are to continue today.

But the gulf between what the immigrants want and what the government is willing to give remains wide. The immigrants say they want to live in the community, not in a **camp** ringed with barbed wire, while their applications are processed. But "moving is not our only demand," Mr. Varasi said.

The government is not budging on its 10-year-old policy of mandatory detention, taking a tough line against a rising tide of migrants shipped here by smugglers who have made **Australia** an increasingly popular destination.

The government delegates who have visited the **camps** said they would recommend closing Woomera in the long term.

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But lawyers for the asylum seekers, who have been barred from the discussions, contend that the delegates, formally an advisory group on the detention of immigrants, serves a limited role.

"They're a papier-mache body," Mr. McDonald said. "They don't have any power to do anything."

Paris Aristotle, a member of the advisory group, conceded that releasing detainees "is not something that we have the capacity to authorize." The group's purpose is diplomatic, he said.

Even moving the asylum seekers from Woomera to another center seems unlikely in the short term. There is no space available at other **camp**s, an immigration agency spokesman said.

Though the government faces mounting criticism from groups like Amnesty International, Prime Minister John Howard and other politicians have said there is no alternative.

"Tough as our policy is," Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said in a recent radio interview, "if we were to abandon that policy, as some suggest, then we'd live with the consequences of having a completely disorderly immigration program."

Making reference to the policy's broad support among Australians, he said, "I'll be more concerned when Australians disagree than when some foreigners do."

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Graphic

Photo: An asylum seeker yesterday at Port Hedland Detention Center in northwest **Australia**. Dozens of **refugees** in scattered **camp**s have stitched their lips during a two-week-old hunger strike to protest **camp** conditions. (Reuters)

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