

# **Asylum Seekers Detained in Australia Suspend Hunger Strike**

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## **Body**

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Hundreds of **asylum seekers** at Woomera, **Australia**'s largest immigration **detention** center, said late Wednesday that they would **suspend** a 15-day **hunger strike** while negotiations continued with the government over their **detention**.

But the government said it had made no change in its policy of **detaining** illegal immigrants while their visa applications were processed, sometimes for years, and protests and **hunger strikes** continued at some of the country's other immigration **detention** centers.

About 100 immigrants at a camp called Curtin in western **Australia** refused to eat for a third day, the government said. Detainees at another western Australian camp, Port Hedland center, are also refusing to eat or drink, according to reports.

Whether the tentative peace brokered with Afghan **asylum seekers** at Woomera, in the desert plains of South **Australia**, will last depends on continued discussions with representatives of the government's advisory group on **detention**, a spokesman for the immigrants said.

"The **hunger strike** ends, but it doesn't mean that the negotiations will be finished," said the spokesman, Hassan Varasi. Members of the advisory group, he said, "promised us that the dialogue, negotiation will continue."

The **asylum seekers** at Woomera, largely from the Middle East, have said their chief demand is to be moved out of mandatory **detention**.

The Australian government uses a network of **detention** centers to hold unauthorized immigrants while their cases are processed, and immigration officials insisted that no policy changes had been made to end the **hunger strike** at Woomera.

The government has once again begun to consider visas for Afghan immigrants, a process **suspended** some weeks ago after the Taliban government in Afghanistan fell under American attacks.

But Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, who welcomed news of the breakthrough, said the action had nothing to do with the protests.

"When you're put under duress and say, 'This is an exception, we just have to give way here,' what happens is more people assume that you can influence decisions by inappropriate behavior and the behavior becomes more and more extreme," Mr. Ruddock said.

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Ray Funnell, a member of the government's advisory group, said that the delegation had been able to build trust with the detainees and their representatives and that they were working together.

But lawyers for the asylum seekers at Woomera, who were barred from the two-day negotiations, say tensions remain and could flare again.

Immigrants, including Iranian and Iraqi asylum seekers, are still upset about conditions at the center and about their continued detention generally.

Advocates for the asylum seekers predict that protests will continue until the policy of mandatory detention, which still enjoys broad support among Australians, is overturned.

The stance has come under growing criticism in Australia, particularly from church groups and doctors, as well as from international organizations.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said this week that it opposed detention of asylum seekers, "particularly when it is prolonged and when it involves minors, which is the case in Australia."

Prime Minister John Howard said Australia would provide resettlement help to Afghan asylum seekers who agree to return home.

The announcement came after he met Wednesday in New York with Afghanistan's interim leader, Hamid Karzai.

The number of illegal immigrants coming to Australia from the Middle East has fallen. Typically, they travel to Indonesia and are then loaded by smugglers into rickety boats to complete their journey by sea.

The government adopted a plan in August to patrol its borders with military aircraft and ships and intercept boats carrying asylum seekers. Australia now takes them to neighboring Pacific islands, instead of to the mainland, to have their visa applications processed.

The opposition Labor Party has criticized the government over the cost of its policies for handling asylum seekers, although final estimates have not yet been made. The Labor Party also backs mandatory detention for illegal immigrants.

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