

The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office Finds Government's Response to Manus Island Protest Disturbing and Warns of Further Protests

The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) is deeply disturbed at the unfolding events on Manus Island. Since Tuesday, 13 January 2013, close to 700 asylum seekers have embarked on a hunger strike with 40 of them sewing their lips together and others swallowing razor blades. Asylum seekers on the Island resorted to these drastic measures after being told that they would be resettled in Papua New Guinea— an unimaginable place for most, who fear being tortured by resentful locals.

As the hunger strike has progressed, asylum seekers have gone without food and water simply shouting “what do we want? Freedom!” One asylum seeker is quoted in the Guardian online pleading “let your government to kill us. Let your government to kill us. We are human beings. We are not bad people ... Please help us. Please help us. We begging you to help us.”

The Australian government's responses to the protest have been; secrecy, denial and then blame shifting. Asylum seekers protesting for their right to freedom and a safeguarded future have been labelled by the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Peter Dutton as “irresponsible.”

ACMRO finds the government's lack of transparency on Manus Island particularly at a time when the lives of individuals are at stake, highly worrying. The current protest bears much similarity to last year's occurrence on Manus Island that escalated out of control and resulted in the death of Reza Barati.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Delegate for Migrants and Refugees, Bishop Gerard Hanna calls for transparency on Manus Island. He states “the Australian public have a right to know the truth of what is happening on Manus Island, given that their taxes are channelled there and asylum seekers are indirectly under their care. Asylum seekers too have a right to information and to know their future prospects of resettlement, regardless of how they arrived on Australian shores”.

The Director of ACMRO, Fr Maurizio Pettena warns “Protests will continue to occur on Manus Island. Asylum seeker claims need to be processed in an efficient and safe manner, leading to reasonable resettlement options. There is no excuse for keeping people detained for periods as long as 18 months. The frustration will boil over time and again and lead to further protests”.

For media enquiries, please contact Boipelo Besele (02) 6201 9848.