

Nauru: Child health scandal in Australia's offshore refugee camp overshadows Pacific Islands Forum

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Australia's offshore processing regime under spotlight with at least 20 troubled refugee children on 'food and fluid refusal'

Nauru's hosting of the Pacific Islands Forum is at risk of being overshadowed by its role in Australia's offshore processing regime – in particular, the acute mental illness of dozens of refugee children.

Medical sources on [Nauru](#) say at least 20 children are in the Australian-run regional processing centre 1 (RPC1) on "food and fluid refusal" and at risk of permanent harm or death.

At least a dozen children, staff say, need evacuation urgently.

Other refugee children who remain in the community are also refusing to eat and drink, but are not receiving intensive medical care "because RPC1 is full of dangerously sick kids", a Nauru source said.

Nauru's president, [Baron Waqa claimed](#), over the weekend that refugee advocates, along with the children's parents, were "pushing" refugee children to self-harm.

"We tend to think ... these kids are pushed into doing something they're not aware of and the dangers of, if that is the case we are extremely worried," Waqa on Sky News ahead of the forum next week.

"These kids are lovely kids, you know, they roam around, they play around and next thing you hear something terrible. It's the way of working the system and probably short-circuiting it just to get to Australia," he said.

"We are investigating a lot of these incidences," he said.

The allegations were immediately rejected by Doctors for Justice convenor Louise Newman, who branded Waqa's dismissal of mental illness "morally unconcionable".

"I reject any suggestions that refugee advocates were to blame for children self-harming on Nauru," Newman said.

"The crisis of mental illness amongst children on Nauru is real. Children are repeatedly attempting suicide by lethal means. There has been a disturbing rise in cases of traumatic withdrawal syndrome also known as resignation syndrome.

“These conditions are increasing as a direct result of prolonged detention, limited access to child and adolescent mental healthcare, and severe stress in families. Children are at the end of their capacity to withstand the trauma of this situation.”

It comes as 84 nongovernment organisations from across the Pacific, led by Amnesty International, have [signed an open letter](#) calling on the forum to put Australia’s offshore processing regime at the top of the meeting’s agenda.

“While it is hard to call out close neighbours and allies, the Pacific Islands Forum is the correct space for this urgent discussion. It is important that Pacific Island countries hold Australia and each other accountable to human rights obligations for all refugees and people seeking asylum,” the letter says.

“These refugees and people seeking asylum have been subject to cruel and degrading conditions over the past five years, with widespread reports of violence against refugees in Papua New Guinea and violence and sexual harassment of women and children on Nauru.”

The chief medical officer of Australian Border Force, [Dr Parbodh Gogna](#), visited the island last week. He has previously said medical facilities on Nauru were better than in parts of Australia.

George Newhouse, the principal solicitor with the National Justice Project, which has successfully petitioned to bring more than a dozen refugee children to Australia from Nauru, said Gogna’s assessment was contradicted by the government’s own evidence before the courts.

“The government acknowledges that there are no inpatient paediatric psychiatric facilities on Nauru so that statement is just nonsense,” Newhouse said.

The courts have also heard from the Australian government that Nauru hospital is not safe for surgery, after a number of deaths.

The tents from [regional processing centre 3](#) – the family camp – were demolished last week, just days ahead of the forum, and families moved to accommodation at the other end of the island.

Previously, families had lived in tents, found by the Australian government to have been [chronically infested with toxic mould](#), for more than five years.

The Pacific Islands Forum – which this year comes in Nauru’s 50th year of independence – is a meeting of 18 national leaders from across the Pacific. Australia is the largest member state, by population and economy. However the prime minister, Scott Morrison, is not attending; the foreign affairs minister, Marise Payne, is deputising for him.

Staff have been told not to speak with journalists, and journalists’ movement around the small country – Nauru is about the size of a metropolitan airport – are being closely monitored.

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