

## SITUATION NOW EXTREMELY DIRE FOR MENTALLY ILL MANUS REFUGEES



The epidemic of suicide attempts by Manus refugees that began late last year is continuing, with another young man attempting suicide last week. He is still in the sole Manus island hospital - which is desperately unsuited to his medical needs. Like the child refugees on Nauru in 2018, he has withdrawal syndrome and is refusing all food and hydration.

It is known that at least 20 refugees now hospitalised in Port Moresby are in a clinically severe psychiatric state - being treated Pacific International Hospital (PIH) in Port Moresby. Last year, the Australian government cut funding for all refugee healthcare on Manus.

Father Giorgio Licini - General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, says that conditions in the PIH Port Moresby are themselves "Hell. One Iraqi will be dead in a few days as he is refusing food and water. Another ingested pieces of metal. The one refugee who could talk to me was someone who had self-harmed innumerable times."

Speaking about the latest suicide attempt, Dr Kerryn Phelps MP has stated, "This appears to be an urgent medical situation."

Father Giorgio observes, "The situation has started worsening significantly since September 2018. We need to convince our PNG Prime Minister to have the strength to tell the Australian government, outgoing or incoming, that enough is enough."

A tour of Manus refugee facilities by Amnesty International and UNHCR in 2018 found that the East Lorengau General Hospital was operating significantly over patient capacity, with close to 50% of doctor positions unfilled. In every sense therefore, the hospital is not set up to treat either locals or refugees in need of anything more than basic healthcare. And yet it is meant to serve the needs of over 600 locals and refugees on the island.

The young man in the East Lorengau General Hospital has yet to be transferred to the hospital in Port Moresby. According to Behrouz Boochani, the Kurdish-Iranian refugee and journalist on Manus, there were well over 50 suicide attempts or self-harm incidents by refugees on the island in December 2018 alone.

Papua New Guinea is dealing with its own widespread poverty, medical crises unknown in Australia such as outbreaks of TB and polio and a persistent deficiency of medication supplies.

Says Dr Phelps, "the medical transfers Bill currently before the Parliament is designed to provide a medically appropriate pathway for urgent cases to be evacuated to Australia.

"It was disappointing that the Morrison Government chose to shut down Parliament at the end of last year without voting on this Bill in the lower house.

"Instances such as this make it vitally important that the Parliament deals with this Bill as the first order of business in 2019."

Father Giorgio concludes, "the people of Manus are also appalled at what is happening under their eyes," adding, "there is no time to wait or to waste."

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Father Giorgio Licini is available for interview via iMessage.