



Pax Christi Australia - International Christian Peace Movement

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Australian families trapped in Syria must be rescued while there is still time

Australian women and children are trapped in al-Hawl, a desolate camp in north-eastern Syria for families of Islamic State fighters. Some 20 women and at least 44 children are held in the camp which houses more than 70,000 family members of Isis fighters, 11,000 of whom are foreigners from close to fifty countries.

Their situation is dire. These camps are inhumanely overcrowded, makeshift prisons. The one medical clinic to which Australian families had access has been closed for days. Reports speak of overflowing latrines and dwindling food and water supplies. In the nine months since December 2018, some 340 children have died in al-Hawl. Those still alive are reported to be bone thin with swollen bellies, a deep cough and a shell-shocked gaze. The mothers are begging to be brought home even if prison awaits them.

Until now the camp has been under Kurdish control, with the border crossing still open. The embattled Kurdish administration of North and East Syria has repeatedly called for countries with nationals inside the camps to repatriate them. So have the UN Human Rights Commissioner and the UN Special Rapporteur on Countering Terrorism, Human Rights Watch and many other human rights organisations.

As Turkish and Syrian forces now close in, an already dire situation will get even worse. The five-day cease-fire will do nothing to ease their plight. There is still time for the Australian government to liberate its citizens from the war zone, but time is short – perhaps days rather than weeks.

Much has been said about the danger some of these Isis family members pose to security in Australia, should they return home. The risk, however, has been blown out of all proportion. Many of these women were lured to Syria based on ignorance of the facts, and by promises and enticements which failed to materialise. Save the Children Australia has reported that the families of those trapped in the camps are prepared to work with Australian law enforcement, intelligence and security agencies if they are repatriated to Australia.

Once back at home, former detainees can be investigated, and where necessary, monitored and prosecuted in line with Australian laws and fair trial standards. Helping these women and children come home serves two moral and legal obligations. It ensures the right to return to one's home country, obstruction by the home state; and it enables justice to be done by bringing to trial those who have committed serious crimes.

As for the danger any rescue operation might encounter, this is what governments are always prepared to do if the lives and well being of their citizens are at stake. This is what we do when Australian citizens are caught up in wars, civil conflicts or natural disasters. We have had many occasions to do this in the past, and will no doubt have need to do it again often in the future.

The moral imperative is beyond dispute. When Australian children are exposed to the terrifying force of violent conflict and abject squalor, their suffering cannot be allowed to continue because of the sins of their parents.

A humane and responsible Australian government would intervene without delay or prevarication to alleviate their medical circumstances and ensure their future well-being.

Signed

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