

## **Collective Aid Webinar: Immigration Detention, From Global Trends to Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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My name Aziz and am Refuge Advocacy Coordinator at the Global Detention Project.

A lot has been said about conditions in immigration detention, and I'd like to build on that – and to talk a bit about what it is actually like to experience these structures as a human being inside them.

I was born and grew up in Sudan. In 2013, I was forced to flee my home due to my political involvement in the country, I travelled to Indonesia and from there I took a boat to Australia.

Unfortunately, I was really not aware what was waiting for me in Australia. I thought it would be a land of freedom and equal opportunity for all, but that dream turned out to be a nightmare that would last for years.

A few weeks after we got to there, my friend and I were forcibly removed to Papua New Guinea, a country that we knew nothing about. What is more, we were sent to an extremely remote island in the middle of the Indian Ocean – Manus Island – we were out of sight and out of mind. We were hidden from the world, without the ability to talk to lawyers, journalists, or even to our own families for the first few months.

Detention on Manus Island detention felt worse than prison. I strongly believe that prisoners in any prison around the world have more rights than we did there. We were treated like hostages and tormented by security forces on the island: most of them were ex-Australian army, who had fought in many of the countries from which the detainees were from, and we felt like prisoners of war.

Having read Collective Aid's report, I'd like to highlight a quote from a former detainee in Lukavica who said: *"You don't feel like you are a human there... This place is worse than prison... People sit there for years"*.

His words echo almost exactly how I felt on Manus Island. I recall my first day there, when our names were changed to numbers. We were not simply detained, but systematically stripped of our dignity.

So, whilst Lukavica and Manus are geographically extremely different, there is much that is strikingly similar about detention in these places.

Collective Aid's report recounts detainees' descriptions of mold-infested cells, broken toilets, and being forced to drink water from sinks next to the toilet. One man said the food was so bad that *"even a dog wouldn't eat it."* I recognised a lot of this. In Manus, we suffered from the same things for many years, like inadequate health care, extreme conditions, and a health crisis that has led to at least 14 asylum seeker deaths (most of them in Manus Island detention centre) and many profound physical and mental harms. We were housed in makeshift shipping containers, so it was really uncomfortable. I too got sick, I don't like thinking about that experience.

The mental health impact is devastating in both contexts. In Lukavica, the report mentioned that people are placed in isolation cells that facilitate self-harm. I, too, was placed in isolation. In my case, the centre management placed me in solitary confinement after I participated in a 15 day hunger strike. This was in 2015, when fellow detainees and I agreed to protest silently. We refused to talk to the guards or the doctors until authorities told us exactly how long they were going to keep us in the centre. They forced us to break our hunger strike, and sent us to prison, including myself as a ringleader.

I was held for 20 days without charge by Papua New Guinean police for trying to uphold my rights. There were many cases of self-harm and suicide attempts at Manus, and UN bodies and many NGO researchers have concluded that prolonged offshore detention exposes asylum seekers to torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, with deep depression, suicidality, and long-term trauma.

What ties these experiences together is not only the suffering, but the deliberate legal limbo. In Bosnia, vague “security threat” labels and readmission agreements allow people to be detained for months or years, with appeals that do not suspend removal. In Australia’s offshore regime, I was detained for 7 years and many of my friends were detained for 8 to 9 years, with no clear timeline, and no durable solution. These policies are explicitly designed to deter others. They are cruelty by design.

Manus Island is one of the clearest and most extreme examples of migration externalisation in practice. Australia transferred asylum seekers offshore to Manus and Nauru, where people were held for years in remote, isolated, and highly securitised conditions. As I mentioned we were reduced to numbers, denied adequate medical care, exposed to violence, and trapped in indefinite legal limbo. The system caused severe mental health deterioration, suicides, and long-term trauma. Manus was built to break people spiritually, mentally, and physically and this happened to many of my friends who I was detained with there.

So Manus, I believe, serves as an important case study, reflecting the real human cost of detention and externalisation: when states outsource asylum processing to other territories, accountability disappears, safeguards collapse, and suffering becomes the tool of deterrence. Manus demonstrates what happens when externalisation is fully implemented, and why similar trends in Bosnia, including EU-funded detention expansion, must be urgently challenged.

In ending this, I was going to draw up a table displaying my experiences side by side with the testimonies presented in Collective Aid’s report. But this table isn’t needed, as my main conclusion is that a very clear pattern emerges between these two cases: In both Lukavica and Manus,

- People are being reduced to numbers or “security threats.”
- They are held for years in degrading conditions.
- Their mental health is shattered.
- Legal safeguards exist on paper but vanish in practice.
- Powerful states and institutions distance themselves from responsibility while continuing to fund and expand these regimes.

We must not treat these two detention examples as exceptions, but as warnings. Any policy that relies on detention, outsourcing, and deliberate uncertainty will reproduce the same harms, whether in Bosnia, Papua New Guinea, or elsewhere around the world.

So again, I reiterate my call, that states cease using immigration detention as a tool of deterrence and control.

Thanks for having me here today.