

## **‘Everyone asks about Novak’ but Mehdi has languished for nine years in Australian immigration detention**

*Iranian was 15 when he arrived by boat in Australia seeking sanctuary. Despite formal recognition as a refugee he hasn’t been free since – he turned 24 on Friday*



*Mehdi, an asylum seeker who is being held in Melbourne’s Park Hotel. During a Covid outbreak, nearly half of the asylum seekers detained there were confirmed to have caught Covid.*

Ben Doherty  
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Nine. Nine birthdays in detention. Mehdi reels them off : “Sixteen, 17, 18, 19 ...”

“I’m 24 now,” he says in resignation. “I’m still here.”

The days he spends now, forcibly restricted to a spartan room in a hotel commandeered by the government to detain refugees, are as hard as any. There is no ranking, no categorising the compartments of indefinite detention.

“I just tried to figure out how to fill my days: I have to survive them. If I can sleep, I sleep as much as I can, otherwise I just go for a smoke, watch movies, read books. But usually, I don’t do anything, I just lay down on the bed. I just lie here.”

The situation in Carlton's Park hotel took an absurdist turn on the eve of Mehdi's birthday. He gained a new downstairs neighbour: the world No 1 tennis player, Novak Djokovic. He can't see the defending Australian Open champion because of the isolation protocols and guards marshalled on every floor.

"There is a disappointment: everyone wants to ask me about Novak, what the hotel is like for him. But they don't ask about us: we have been locked up in this place for months, for years.

"I've never seen so many cameras, so much attention. I hope Novak Djokovic learns about our situation here, and I hope he speaks about it."

Mehdi – he uses only one name – was a child of 15 when he arrived by boat in Australia seeking sanctuary. A member of the persecuted Ahwazi Arab minority in his homeland Iran, his family urged him to flee, and arranged for his fraught passage, hoping he might find freedom on the other side of the world.

Mehdi's claim for protection was swiftly recognised – Australia is legally obliged to protect him and cannot return him to harm. But the formality of refugee status has not brought Mehdi safety, or a new start in life: he has been held, in some way or another, in some place or another – Nauru, Brisbane, and now Melbourne's notorious Park hotel – every day since.

Mehdi has watched boatmates he arrived alongside leave detention to begin lives, careers and families in Australia; he has watched others in detention burn themselves to death in despair. He has been beaten, abused, incarcerated without reason.

Mehdi has never been charged with a crime, nor has any wrongdoing been alleged against him, yet still he has not known a day of freedom in Australia. Friday is his ninth birthday in detention.

"I'm getting older; it's really sad that my youth, my teenage time – that's been wasted. I don't want to leave here as a middle-aged man, all those years lost."

The connection he can find to the outside world only exacerbates that pain.

"Young people, I see them having a fun time, posting on Instagram and all that. And I am so far, far away from that. I'm still here. Every single day.

"The birthdays," he says, "are the saddest days. They are supposed to be the happiest, but during my time in detention, they are always the heaviest days. I spend the whole day thinking about all the years I've lost."

Each day is a question of self-preservation, Mehdi says. He is close with a cousin, Adnan, who arrived on the same boat and is also in the Park hotel. But sometimes, enduring means withdrawing.



*The Park Hotel in Melbourne where Mehdi and other asylum seekers are being held. In one window, a sign can be seen that reads, '9 YRS 2 LONG'.*

"I have to come up with the best method for surviving. Sometimes, I feel like if I communicate with other people in the same situation, their frustrations could affect my mental health."

Counterintuitively, defiantly drawing public attention to his plight serves the same existential purpose.

"This is also a method of my survival: to speak out. It's a way to exist. You are doing something, not just sitting invisible or forgotten."

Mehdi has been approved for resettlement in the US under Australia's swap arrangement with the US, the 2016 deal under which America agreed to resettle refugees held offshore by Australia, in exchange for Australia accepting Central American refugees from US-run camps. The deal has seen nearly 1,000 refugees resettled, but it has been painfully slow, and the allocation of places appears capricious to those waiting, sometimes for years, for a spot that may never come.

Mehdi is losing faith his day will ever arrive.

"There are no updates, no deadlines. I cannot rely on it, I don't feel it's going to happen soon, and there is no guarantee it is going to happen at all."

Mehdi has watched friends, including other refugees who arrived as children, walk out of detention bound for an airport and a flight to freedom.

"It's good to see people get out of here, but the other side of the coin is 'why not me, why not the rest of these people?' I don't see any particular reason that they keep me here."

Mehdi says he finds the inconsistencies in the government's purportedly consistent policy on boat arrivals infuriating.

The government continues to say that no person who arrives seeking asylum by boat will be resettled in Australia, but Mehdi says he knows of dozens who have been.

The government refuses to accept New Zealand's offer to resettle refugees from Australia's "offshore cohort", arguing it would act as a "pull factor", an incentive for people to come to Australia by boat. But if New Zealand is an incentive, why is the US not?

On the bad days, Mehdi finds himself going in circles. "It's hard when you don't have answers to your questions: why should I spend nine years in detention; why there is no deadline; what is my crime?"

"Why has the government released thousands of people who come by boat, but kept a handful of the refugees in detention. Why? Are we a sacrifice for the sake of policy?"

Nauru was a brutality, often deliberate, it seemed, Mehdi says. The school, the one bright light of the refugee children's existence in that place, was shut down. Mehdi was thrown in jail for protesting his conditions in detention. A guard threatened to kill him.

Brisbane's immigration transit accommodation was chaotic and angry, Mehdi says.

Conversely, Melbourne's Park hotel has been nothing but solitude. Mehdi spends all of his days, save for a precious few minutes smoking, in the loneliness of his austere hotel room.

Even the tiny smoking balcony, once a chance "to see the sky, to feel the fresh air", has been boarded up.

In October and November, a Covid outbreak swept through the refugees and asylum seekers held inside the hotel. At one stage 22 of the 46 people then detained there had Covid. One refugee took federal court action to ensure an ambulance crew was allowed access to the hotel to assess and treat him.

Before it was a detention centre, under its former name, Rydges, the hotel was used for quarantine and was the centre of Victoria's second Covid wave. It was responsible for 90% of Covid cases in the state because of "insufficient ... prevention and control standards [and] concerns regarding matters including: access to fresh air; access to good quality food; the state of cleanliness of the facility".

After the devastating second wave, the hotel was dropped from the quarantine regime, sold, renamed, and then commandeered by the government as an "alternative place of detention" for refugees and asylum seekers, mostly those who had come from Nauru and Papua New Guinea suffering serious illnesses. The windows in the hotel's rooms were drilled shut to stop them opening at all.



*Mehdi (right) and his cousin Adnan, who are being held in the Park Hotel. Windows of the hotel's rooms are drilled shut so detainees cannot open them.*

On 27 December, refugees held in the Park Hotel posted pictures of maggots found in the food they were served in their rooms.

A week earlier, a fire broke out in the upper levels of the hotel. When refugees fled to the ground floor lobby they were stopped from leaving by guards. Some were hyperventilating with anxiety; others were forced to urinate in bottles because there were no toilets.

Mehdi's childhood home in Iran was razed in a fire, "and it kind of traumatised me ... so when this fire happened, I was anxious, I had breathing problems.

"There were alarms ringing, there was smoke also, and it was so chaotic. People were screaming, guards were yelling and we were so frustrated. We could see the park and the street, the fire trucks, and police, but they just kept us there for hours."

The department of home affairs did not respond to a detailed series of questions from Guardian Australia about Mehdi's ongoing indefinite detention.

In the stasis of indefinite detention, there are no new year resolutions. Each day is the same as the last.

“I don’t think you’d call it a wish, but I think I just need to get free. To enjoy my youth. It is being wasted in detention. I don’t see any reason for that. Why? Why should I stay any longer here?”