

At an Australian Hotel, Djokovic Is Not the Only Cause of Controversy

The tennis star is quarantining in a Melbourne hotel where asylum seekers have been held for over a year, under a program that has been widely criticized.



The police stood in front of the Park Hotel in Melbourne, Australia, on Thursday, as demonstrators protesting the government's detention policies for asylum seekers were removed.

By Yan Zhuang and Damien Cave
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MELBOURNE, Australia — The people demonstrating outside the Park Hotel in Melbourne on Saturday were a disparate group.

Some were Serb-Australians and anti-vaccine campaigners, there to support Novak Djokovic, the tennis superstar who is in quarantine there as he challenges Australia's decision to deny him entry over questions about a Covid-19 vaccine exemption.

A separate group of protesters held signs proclaiming “refugees welcome” and “nine years too long.” They were drawing attention to a very different cause: the well-being of about 30 asylum seekers who have been held at the Park Hotel much longer than Mr. Djokovic, the Australian Open champion.

Since December 2020, the Australian Border Force has used the hotel to house refugees who had been held for years on remote Pacific islands, under Australia's much-criticized offshore detention policy for asylum seekers who try to reach the country by boat. Those at the Park Hotel were brought to Australia for medical

treatment, but they cannot leave the hotel for any other reason, and they do not know how long they will be kept there.

For activists, Mr. Djokovic's detention at the same hotel has been an opportunity to tell the world about the asylum seekers' plight.

"The detention of Djokovic is shining a much-needed spotlight on Australia's cruel, inhumane system of mandatory detention," said Elaine Pearson, the Australia director for Human Rights Watch.

Mr. Djokovic's family and the government of his country, Serbia, have denounced the conditions under which they say he is being held at the Park Hotel, a no-frills, four-story facility on the outskirts of Melbourne's central business district. His family says Mr. Djokovic has been subjected to bugs in his room and terrible food. The Serbian government has demanded better accommodations.

Asylum seekers at the hotel have made similar complaints. Just after Christmas, some posted pictures of moldy and maggot-infested food they said they had received in their rooms. Earlier in December, some said that after a fire broke out at the hotel, they were confined to the lobby and not allowed outside.



Detainees at the Park Hotel on Thursday. Novak Djokovic's arrival there has drawn new attention to the asylum seekers' cause.

Several asylum seekers said the windows of their rooms had been screwed shut, denying them access to fresh air. In October and November, a coronavirus outbreak swept through their ranks. At one point, 22 of the 46 asylum seekers who were then being held at the hotel had Covid.

An Australian Border Force statement said detainees in immigration hotels had “access to dedicated indoor and outdoor exercise and activity areas,” appropriate food, “clean, comfortable sleeping quarters” and other amenities.

Alison Battisson, a human rights lawyer who represents some of the asylum seekers in the hotel, said Australia’s detention system was deliberately intended to “make the conditions so awful you choose to go back to the place of harm you came from.”

“That’s what Mr. Djokovic has found himself in — this deterrence policy nightmare,” Ms. Battisson said.

Most of the asylum seekers at the hotel were taken to Australia in 2019. They had previously been detained in offshore processing centers in the Pacific island nation of Nauru or on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, and were brought to Australia under a short-lived program for detainees who needed medical attention.

They arrived desperate for a reprieve from the indefinite detention and miserable conditions they had endured, then found themselves confined to a building where they could see normal Australian life outside their windows, just beyond reach.

Ms. Battisson said that if Mr. Djokovic had been treated like her clients were, he would have been handcuffed and transported to the hotel in a van with black-tinted windows. His access to vitamins and medication would be decided by the nurse on duty, if one was on duty at all. He would not be allowed access to anything that the authorities decided could be used for self-harm, she said — “for example, not even a skipping rope to help him keep fit.”



Supporters of Mr. Djokovic prayed outside the Park Hotel on Friday.

And while Mr. Djokovic's stay will be temporary, the asylum seekers locked inside have no idea how long their detention will last.

"We cannot get out of the hotel," said Mehdi Ali, a 24-year-old Iranian refugee. "We're surrounded by walls."

Mr. Ali was young when he fled Iran, where he says he was subjected to persecution as a member of the Ahwazi Arab ethnic minority. At 15, he was among a group of asylum seekers whose boat was apprehended as they tried to reach Australia.

He spent years in a string of detention centers before arriving at the Park Hotel a few months ago. He says he lost nine years of his youth to Australia's immigration policy — waiting for rain on Nauru island so he could take a shower; participating in hunger strikes; trying to treat the rats in his room like pets.

Since the news broke that Mr. Djokovic was being held at the Park Hotel, he has received a flood of messages from strangers who had just learned about his situation, Mr. Ali said.

"I kind of get excited about it, that people are getting to know about our circumstance," he said. "But I also get disappointed and I get sad, because why haven't they known we have been in detention for more than eight years?"

Shankar Kasynathan, a human rights campaigner with Amnesty International, was one of about a dozen refugee advocates who were protesting outside the hotel on Saturday morning.

"It's been nine years, and it's too long," he said. "We're calling on Novak to use his influence, support base and platform to call this out and help us and help Australia bring an end to this cruelty."

He added that the protesters he was with were trying to stay separate from those demonstrating on behalf of Mr. Djokovic or against vaccine mandates. Some pro-asylum-seeker and anti-vaccine demonstrators got into a verbal confrontation that was broken up by the police.

In the afternoon, an anti-vaccine protest that began in Melbourne's central business district made its way up to the hotel. About 50 police officers surrounded 100 protesters who banged on drums, blew on whistles and chanted "Novak, Novak." Some wore Serbian flags as capes and danced to music.

Some Djokovic supporters seemed to embrace the refugee cause, at times chanting "freedom for all" as asylum seekers watched from their windows.

Many Melbourne residents who stopped outside the hotel, which is on a busy tram route, said they had only just become aware that asylum seekers were being detained there.



Some pro-asylum-seeker and anti-vaccine demonstrators got into a verbal confrontation that was broken up by the police on Saturday.

“I’ve passed this street thousands of times and never known refugees were being held here,” said Bobby Tomasevic, 55, who had dropped by hoping to catch a glimpse of Mr. Djokovic. “It’s shocking.”

Before being used to detain asylum seekers, the Park Hotel — under its former name, Rydges — had been used as a Covid quarantine facility, with poor results. It was an epicenter of the second Covid wave to hit Melbourne, which led to a lengthy lockdown for the city.

Australia’s offshore detention policy has been criticized at home and abroad for years. According to the Australian government’s statistics, as of September, 117 asylum seekers had been in detention for five years or more, and several for more than 10 years. That number has been declining in recent years, as dozens of refugees moved to the United States after being vetted by the American authorities, under a deal brokered during President Barack Obama’s administration.

But the process has been slow, and the costs of the program have been considerable. According to the Department of Home Affairs, the hotel detention in Melbourne costs 471,493 Australian dollars per year, per detainee — or about \$338,600, which amounts to more than \$900 per night.

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