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Advocates Warn Against Handing Refugee Settlement Contract to Nauru Government

Refugee advocates have warned the Australian government against handing any refugee settlement services contracts to the Nauru government or Nauru-run businesses.

The concerns have risen since the Australian-run Connect Settlement Services indicated that it was pulling out of Nauru on December 7. Connect was contracted by the Australian government to provide services for refugees living in the Nauruan community.

The government is yet to announce a service provider to take over the Connect contract. But concerns are growing that the government could be considering funding the Nauru government and to shift away from refugee specific services to a more general Nauruan community welfare.

A Connect representative told Connect workers on Nauru that the Connect board did not believe it was 'appropriate for an Australia-based company to be in Nauru forever', and that its job a settlement services job 'had been completed.' The representative told the meeting that the services need now were about 'on-going welfare needs, ' and that settlement services were not what was needed when people were living in the [Nauru] community 'independently'.

However the representative later told the meeting was that Connect understood that refugees were in a 'desperate situation' and were 'desperately unhappy'.

The comments are in line with Connect's moves made over recent months to increase the number of locals working for the company and for it to be seen as concerned with welfare in the Nauruan community rather than provide services for refugees.

There have also been growing concerns that Connect was complicit with the Nauruan government and had resorted to calling the Nauruan police in accommodation disputes – resulting in some refugees being jailed.

"That Connect is quitting Nauru is unequivocally a step forward," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"But replacing Connect with a Nauruan company would be a serious blunder. Refugees already regard the withdrawal of Connect as something that will leave them even more vulnerable to human rights abuses on the island.

"It's time the desperate situation described by Connect is ended. The government should use Connect's 7 December end-of-contract deadline to close Nauru and bring all the asylum seekers and refugees to the mainland."

Judith Reen, ex Nauru Save the Children worker also voiced her concerns, "It is well documented that Nauru is a hostile place where refugees can be verbally abused, assaulted, raped and robbed with impunity, with no hope of crimes being properly investigated. To date, not one crime committed by a Nauruan national against a refugee has resulted in arrest or prosecution.

“It is frightening to think that the responsibility for refugees would be with a government that enforces a media block-out, in a country that where there is clearly system-wide failure in law enforcement and which lacks adequate protections for the most vulnerable.”

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