



Phone ban will deprive refugees of a lifeline to the outside world

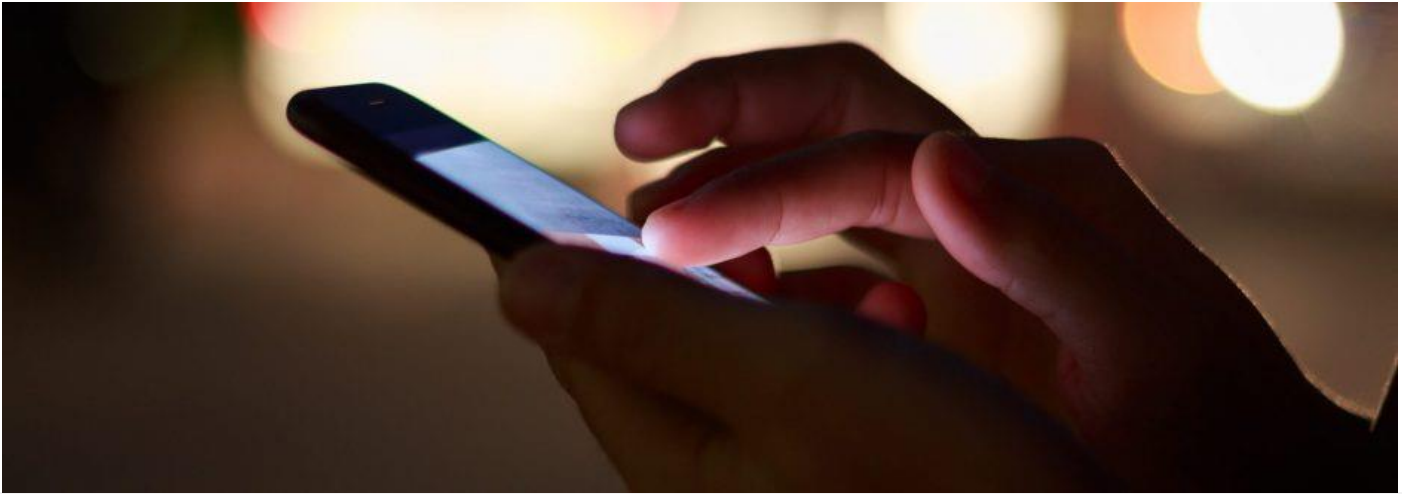


Image: 123rf.com, Varin Rattanaburi.

A move by the Australian Government to introduce legislation allowing the seizure of mobile phones from people held in immigration detention centres is unnecessary and cruel, according to refugee advocates.

Last month, [Acting Immigration Minister Alan Tudge announced legislation](#) that would give Border Force officials search and seizure powers and allow the minister to ban certain items from the detention facilities, including mobile phones.

Mr Tudge denied it would be a blanket ban, saying it would only apply to those suspected of being involved in illegal activity.

“It’s a policy of cruelty,” says Good Samaritan Sister Clare Condon, who is part of Canberra’s Faith-Based Working Group of the [Refugee Action Campaign](#) (RAC).

“Some of these guys have been in detention for seven years and their phone is their only lifeline to their family, friends and others in the community.

“This is just the latest move from the Government to use these people as weapons to try and stop others from seeking Australia’s protection.”

The Faith-Based Working Group (FBWG) of the RAC currently has representatives from across Christian denominations and, in the past, has included members from the Jewish and Islamic faiths. Its members seek to advocate for refugees and asylum seekers within their own faith communities, to raise awareness, to mobilise political action and, in some cases, to provide practical support within the local refugee community.

Brigidine Sister Jane Keogh is a member of the group and has worked extensively with refugees over the past 20 years through a variety of community organisations, including the Manus Lives Matter program. She has been to Manus Island twice and is in touch regularly with refugees and asylum seekers in detention both in Papua New Guinea and Australia.

She says the latest move to ban mobile phones is just part of the Government's ongoing demonisation of refugees.

"If you look at the 140 men who were medically evacuated here under the legislation that Dr Kerryn Phelps (former Independent Member for Wentworth) introduced, not one of them has been allowed into any kind of community detention.

"Instead, they've been locked up in hotels and no priority has been put on treating their medical conditions, which include diabetes, stomach ulcers, heart and liver problems as well as deteriorating mental states.

"They've spent eight months on one floor of a hotel in Melbourne or Brisbane. They've been denied computers, so they can't even do online courses; they've been denied the privilege of going outside and being involved with activity; and they are worried about the coronavirus because they are accommodated three or four to a room.

"Now on top of that they want to take their phones away."

Jane says refugee advocates have bought smart phones for the men in detention and pay for phone credit.

"If they take their phones away, how will they talk to their families?"

"They can't do anything without their phones. And they won't be able to talk to us," she says.

"The only way they've stayed alive up to now is through us being in contact with them and telling them we're never giving up, we're writing letters to politicians, we're holding protests. But I'm sure it's that link with people like us that the Government is seeking to stop."

Dr John Minns, Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at Australian National University, is the Convenor of RAC Canberra, and says the Government's assurance that only those involved in criminal activity will have their phones banned, doesn't ring true.

"This is not about national security," he says. "Where is there the slightest evidence that these people have been involved in criminal activity?"

"But even if they were, if the police suspect people are involved in illegal activity out in the broader community, can they come and take their phones away? Of course they can't. And yet they set up a separate standard for these people.

"They haven't been charged with anything in seven years of being here, let alone convicted."

On top of that, John says all of the people brought here under the Medevac Bill were given clearance on character and criminal grounds before they left PNG.

He says the mobile phone is a necessity for anyone in the modern world, but it has proven especially crucial in holding governments and authorities to account.

"We wouldn't know what happened to George Floyd in the United States if there hadn't been a mobile phone recording, or to the young Aboriginal man in Sydney recently, or the conditions on Manus Island," he says.

At public meetings and rallies held to raise awareness of their situation, men in detention have addressed the crowd via their mobile phone.

"Without a phone, their voice would be silenced."

“This proposed legislation is not about them. It’s about us. It’s about us not seeing what is going on,” John says.

Dr Rosamund Dalziell, who is an Anglican representative on the Faith-Based Working Group, says mobile phones are the only way those in detention can keep in touch with their families and with migration agents working on their behalf.

“It is perfectly valid for them to be in touch with migration agents,” she says. “They’re not criminals. Their phone is their link to the outside world.

“These men need to be placed in more appropriate accommodation and receive the care they need until their claims are processed.”

Kelli Hughes, who represents the Baptist Church on the FBWG, says she has regular contact with a range of refugees and has assisted in various practical ways over the years, like buying winter clothes, helping with accommodation and forming friendship links for those released into the community.

“I’m in touch with one man in detention who is from Sri Lanka, and he sends me an inspirational message on his phone first thing every day. I’ll send him back a bright flower or a bird and say, ‘I hope this brightens your day’. I’d hate to see those moments of human contact taken away from him,” she says.

“Indefinite detention is mental torture and this kind of outside contact is what keeps them going.”

Catholic member of the FBWG, Monica Phelan agrees that apart from political advocacy and awareness-raising, groups like theirs are focusing on providing much-needed human contact with those in detention.

“It’s a matter of trying to keep their spirits up,” she says. “It’s so un-Christian what this Government is doing, keeping them in detention. We don’t understand the apathy of the Australian electorate.

“It’s absolutely essential that their phones are not taken away from them. It’s wrong, unnecessary and cruel, and I really believe that people could die because of it.

“We will keep fighting because it takes away from our humanity if we just let it happen. If government can do this to one group of vulnerable people, they can do it to anyone. We can’t forget these people who just want to have a life.”

The Good Oil

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