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AFP

Afghan asylum seekers on hunger strike in Indonesia

05/05/2012



An elderly Afghan woman sits with a group of Afghan asylum seekers at a police station in Malang town, East Java province in April 2012. More than 160 Afghan asylum seekers held in Indonesia have been on hunger strike for almost four days demanding transfer to Australia, with some needing hospital treatment, an official said Friday

More than 160 Afghan asylum seekers held in Indonesia have been on hunger strike for almost four days demanding transfer to Australia, with some needing hospital treatment, an official said Friday.

"They started the hunger strike on Monday evening," Muhammad Yunus Junaid, head of the

detention centre on Bintan island near Singapore, told AFP, adding there were 169 asylum seekers, all male and aged 17 to 40.

"They said they could not stand staying in the centre any longer. They want to go to Australia and live a normal life there," he said.

Forty of the asylum seekers detained at the Tanjung Pinang city detention centre were sent to hospital Thursday and put on drips, some suffering from anaemia and others losing consciousness, Junaid said.

Thirty-five have since been released and are back on hunger strike.

Some of the asylum seekers had been locked up for two years before striking to pressure the United Nations High Commission for Refugees into granting them refugee status, which would let them apply to go to Australia, Junaid said.

Junaid said that about 50 migrants from Myanmar at the same centre also went on a hunger strike last week for three days but they were not granted refugee status.

Indonesia is a common transit point for asylum seekers trying to reach Australia, but many of the overloaded, rickety boats do not make it.

In December, a boat carrying around 250 mostly Afghan and Iranian asylum seekers sank in Indonesian waters on its way to Christmas Island, with only 47 surviving.