



This is a transcript from *The Messenger* – a podcast series produced by Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre. *The Messenger* brings you into the Australian immigration detention centre on Manus Island – and reveals, in intimate detail, one man's experience of what it's really like to flee tragedy and seek asylum by boat.

## Episode 7: A Small Village

[Sound of ringing]

**Michael Green: So I'm just calling Aziz here, or I'm trying ... It doesn't seem to be going that well.**

[Sound of ringing]

MG: Hello Aziz. Hello?

Abdul Aziz Muhamat: Hello.

MG: Hey! Aziz, how are you?

A: Hello, how are you?

MG: Oh my goodness.

A: [laughs]

MG: This is amazing.

A: Finally –

MG: I'm so excited to –

A: It's really amazing, man.

[Aziz's voice comes through in snatches]

MG: Oh hey man, I can't, I can't ... it's, it's not coming through properly anymore.

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**So it was June 2016. It was over a month since the detention centre had been judged illegal by the PNG Supreme Court. It felt like the centre could be closed any day.**

**Even though Aziz was in detention on Manus Island, in the northern-most province of PNG, he was on his phone all day, sending me WhatsApp messages, on Facebook with friends and activists and following the latest news in Australia. It felt like he was hyper connected. And yet, we never actually got to talk properly.**

**Aziz was now allowed to use his phone, which meant he could find the spots where the signal was strongest and try to make a call. It still didn't work. But when that phone call went through, even just for a moment, it was exhilarating.**

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**MG: From Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre, you're listening to The Messenger. This podcast is about Abdul Aziz Muhamat, and his life inside the Australian-run immigration detention centre on Manus Island. My name is Michael Green.**

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**In one of our very first conversations, Aziz and I made a deal.**

A: One day ... maybe one day we will sit and have coffee, and we will discuss about something else man, that will be one day, don't worry about it.

MG: Wherever you end up going someday I'll come there and meet you and have a coffee and we can talk about the weather maybe or I don't know, something. Something.

**MG: At first, the idea of meeting Aziz in person remained just a nice thought. But then, after the PNG Supreme Court decision, the men were allowed to travel out to Lorengau, the main town on Manus, during the day. Slowly, the possibility dawned on me. Maybe I could make it to Manus? But Aziz refused to leave the detention centre. And how could I even get there?**

**We continued to rely on our short, jumbled up voice messages.**

**The Islamic holy month of Ramadan had begun. Aziz was fasting during the day, and sending me a lot of messages in the middle of the night.**

A: Hey Michael, it is Aziz, it is, 28 past 2 on Manus Island and I am up so I thought it may be good idea if I could, ah, keep, ah, telling my story.

MG: Good morning Aziz. Um, yeah, how's it going so far?

A: Well I did, I did this Ramadan for three years I think in this place, this is my third one ... it's just normal, you know, the first, only the first years that I have suffered because of the climate, ah, because of the atmosphere you know ... I've been a bit dehydrated but now I'm alright actually doing it ... and you know down here we have like, half of the men here, they are fasting actually.

It's a month of mercy and tolerance. So, and also it's the only month that it can keep you close to god by ... asking for god to, you know, to forgive you and for all your deeds and also like, like asking for god to make, you know, to make a safe path for you.

**MG: Two other things were going on. There was another hearing coming up in the PNG Supreme Court, towards the end of Ramadan, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June.**

MG: I think I read a note on Facebook from Ben Lomai saying that he thought that the Supreme Court might make some orders to close the camp.

**MG: And just two days after that, Australians would be voting in a federal election.**

A: Well, I, I do have a hope of the elections and even many other mens in this place, they do have a hope of the elections. We cannot predict, we cannot predict what will happen, actually, to us after election, but what we, according to what we are seeing from the, er, our own political view is that, er, after election, it's something going to happen. Why? Because now the pressure is exceeding every day ... on the political party, such as like Liberal or Labor or Green or whoever ... like, every day passed people are putting a lot of quotes, like on Facebook about us. When the new government comes and then they will solve the problems.

If you ask me personally who should I prefer ... on the election ... I know actually. I like few things about the Labor party, they, if you remember, a couple of weeks ago they mention few things about their party such as like ... we will try to negotiate with the Canadian government so that we can send some people to Canada ... So in this case I prefer actually Labor.

**MG: I was surprised that Aziz would place his hopes in the Labor Party. It was a Labor government, after all, that had re-introduced offshore processing, and**

**started the idea of regional resettlement in PNG. And that was still Labor's policy going into the election.**

**It might have been an impression he'd gotten from Facebook – that the parties were under pressure over Manus Island. It didn't seem that way to me. From what I could see, unlike previous elections, border security and asylum seekers weren't a big issue in this campaign.**

A: Although Greens are also one of the party that they're still fighting for us. But ah, you know, I know that Green is not really a big party, although I don't know actually what they say. But I've got a few friends actually on Facebook, they are actually supporting Greens.

**MG: Aziz keeps in touch with a lot of people through Facebook.**

MG: Oh hey, and one other thing, um, just about that, this photo that, er, you've put now it's your profile pic on WhatsApp but also, on Facebook and I was just, it's amazing, you had like a hundred likes on the photo and seventy comments from people.

A: You know Michael ... I never thought I would get people, like get hundreds of people they would you know comments and likes and then so many comments on my Facebook.

MG: So like, is your family on there? Um, 'cause I know that they don't know where you are but, yeah I was wondering if they see what you post on Facebook?

A: Now with the, er, in the Facebook I don't know, I don't have actually er, anyone from my family, I have, I have only two or three guys from my relative actually ... So that is all but the rest of them are some of them they're from the, from the detention centre and then the rest of them, like, from Australia as well and, like, from everywhere around the world I have got a friends actually.

MG: I'm just really struck by this that the strangeness of the situation where you're isolated on this remote island but at the same time you're in communication with the world [laughs]. But then also ... yeah, in isolation from your family too.

A: Yeah, you are right, Michael, on this point you know, the world become like a small village. It's only from the 2014 actually, that was our first time when I start getting in touch with these people and that was even my first time when I thought it like how look, I feel like really, you know, I have got energy so why just can't I keep you know, writing, and why can't I just keep in touch with the outside world.

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**MG: Even though Aziz was constantly online, and we'd been communicating so much, I kept thinking about visiting Manus, and meeting him face to face.**

MG: I've been doing a bit of research about coming to visit on Manus and umm, I've found a place to stay and I'm just thinking about, what, a good time for me to come would be?

A: The good time, is for you to come down here to Manus Island, is maybe have to wait after Ramadan. And after Ramadan, as you say, there's the election and then after the election there is a court case. So there is a heap of stuff going on there.

**MG: The more I looked into it, the more it seemed possible. So I decided to try.**

MG: I am going to book my flight today and send off my visa application. There's a chance that I won't get given a visa. In that case I might not get to visit but I'm gonna apply. So I could be seeing you in just a few weeks.

A: Oh, oh, good on you Michael, good to hear that you are applying for the visa, but to be honest my friend, er I don't, I'm not sure actually but there are a few other people that I been in touch with them, they have tried to come down here but they haven't got a visa ... but all I can say to you is like good luck and hope to see you down here. That's all I can say because I know it's really hard.

MG: I haven't heard anything so I put it in about a week and a half ago and, I haven't heard back yet ... I really don't know at this point if they're gonna give me a visa.

**MG: My departure date was coming soon, and even though I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get on the plane, I couldn't help imagining our first meeting.**

MG: Say I'm walking along the streets of Lorengau and I bump into you, how will I know that it's you? I was wondering if you could describe, describe you, yourself. Like, are you tall or short? Um, and [laughs], so I am skinny and kinda tall but not, not really, really tall and I've got sort of messy, brown hair.

A: Well I'm kind of like same as your descriptions, tall, skinny and well, short hair with a ah um dark and ... normally like easy you can figure me out when I'm just walking on the streets because ah I'm pretty look like a difference from the local here.

**MG: I asked Aziz if he needed me to bring him anything.**

A: What can I say, I don't actually need anything, you know, to be honest Michael, like if you asked me what you really need because I'm just really sick and tired of this place and I need to get out of here you know I, like, this is what I'm telling some of my friends the other day we had a joke between ah me and Behrouz –

**MG: That's Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish journalist, and fellow detainee, who Aziz has talked about before.**

A: – that Behrouz asked me 'What do you think, do you, what do you think ah about our future?' And I say, I told him that I'm smelling the breeze of the freedom is coming on the way and then he's laughing. So he asked me to, to describe more about that and to clarify it for him. And I say well, I'm not going to clarify for you ... until the day when ah the PNG court you know when they say like oh Australia you have to take these people out of this place within a month or two months. That will be the time when I'm gonna say eureka!

**MG: Hearing Aziz speak like that, and seeing speculation that the Supreme Court might order the centre to shut down, it really felt like by the time I visited – if I visited – Aziz would be celebrating. It seemed like whoever won the election would have to solve the problem, urgently. At the very least, I thought that Aziz would soon find out when it would all end.**

MG: That prospect of some kind of freedom must seem a little bit closer now that is has previously. So, I was wondering ... like what do you think about when you think of freedom? What do you want and what do you imagine when someone says that one day you'll be free?

A: To be honest Michael ... I don't know actually how am I going to feel if they just today release me out of this detention centre and then they say just walk, walk away with on your own. Or if they say to me like, oh tomorrow we going to release you. I've been detained in this place for 3 years, over 3 years actually. I haven't got even one single chance to go to take one steps by myself ... without being escorted by the security guard.

And then if someone came and told me that oh, you're free to go today, but tomorrow that is like he gonna put me actually very, very you know, dangerous position maybe I could have like kind of shaking or I, you know maybe some people even, not myself, but some people they can get like kind of heart attack. And, ah ... I cannot actually imagine about that because it's really, it looks like a long process and then when you first start imagine about it, takes me far away. So I don't actually, ah, I don't actually wants to you know think about it or imagine about it.

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[Audio from ABC TV election coverage, 2 July 2016]

Leigh Sales: It's 5.30 on the Eastern Seaboard and that means in 30 minutes polling booths will close, bringing an end to the longest election campaign in a generation. In the past three terms of parliament Australia has had as prime ministers as the last three decades. Will we have another by the end of tonight?

**MG: I was at home, watching the coverage. At about nine o'clock, Aziz sent me some text messages asking what was going on. I tried to explain.**

MG: Um, are you saying you're confused about what's happening with the election? It's very close. Um, but uh so basically, one of the, each of the parties has to get 76 members elected in order to be the government. Um and so that's in the lower house that governments form there's also the upper house so for them to pass legislation they have to pass it through the lower house and then the upper house. [Begins to fade out] And um I haven't seen any results from the upper house yet.

A: Uh can you please just send us last update about the election, what's happen, who's the winner? Liberal or Labor?

MG: It might be officially announced until tomorrow, people are saying.

A: We are following it on our phones actually, which is posted on ABC ... and the results show that seventy-three and so they are very close now at the moment but, Labor it's bit far away from Liberal from where I can see right now.

[Audio from ABC TV election coverage, 2 July 2016]

Antony Green: And I think I've got some seats in doubt, I've got lots of seats in doubt in fact, there all sorts of seats in doubt, so that's why we're not calling the election yet ...

Barrie Cassidy: ... it will be a long night before we know whether or not this government has a working majority.

MG: I mean what do you make of all this? What do you, what do you think about it?

A: Oh, we are just waiting as everyone else actually. We can't sleep at all tonight because everyone is just holding his phone and then they are just checking the results. So what I can say is just we are really just more anxious to know what's going on exactly and who is gonna be the winner.

**MG: Watching the rolling coverage, the election seemed a bit like sport. The politicians on screen were barracking for their team and trash-talking the other side. But then I heard that message ...**

A: ... and then they are just checking the results. So what I can say is just we are really just more anxious to know what's going on exactly ...

**MG: ... and thought of the men sitting together on Manus, looking at their phones, trying to figure out if they might get their freedom.**

MG: Well, it looks to me like there's not going to be an announcement either way tonight. So, I think you guys if you wanna go to sleep you should go to sleep. Uh it could even be, not even tomorrow, it could be a couple of days before we know.

A: It's really hard for us to sleep because we need to know who is the winner, because it's, ah – relating to our future actually.

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[Audio from ABC TV election coverage, 2 July 2016]

Leigh Sales: Greg, we're just seeing the prime minister now, he's emerged from the lift and he's making his way to the stage now.

Malcolm Turnbull: It is, it is a very, very close count. It is a very close count as you know, and right now nearly 30% of the vote have yet to be counted ... And we may, the final results, in terms of seats, may not be known until then, so will have to wait a few days ...

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MG: Hey good morning Aziz, Eid Mubarak! Ramadan is over. Maybe you're up having breakfast in the daylight. Um, I'm not sure, tell me about how you're celebrating. I hope you're feeling good and happy that the fasting is over and you can mark the occasion with your friends. I imagine it must be a bit of a hard time as well because you would like to see your family at this time.

A: Oh hey Michael, Eid Mubarak! We have just finished actually praying and then now we are just greeting each other and asking for forgiveness and then, like, it's kind of a movement that we make it around the centre, so we move and then greet all the nationality you know individually ... 'cause Ramadan is over and everyone is just saying happy and then they are asking for forgiveness from their friends.



Yeah, this moment actually it's the moment where we need to be very close to our families and ah, this not the moment that we can, we should spend it by our self, down here.

I'm going to try to speak to my family in a couple of hours at this time, maybe they just wake up, and then they are trying to go, like, praying and praying so they can be ready. And then they just – after that, they will be ready, they can answer the phone.

MG: Ah, sorry to hear that it hasn't been a happy day for you. It's not surprising, I guess, but yeah I'm sad to hear that.

A: Yeah, Michael, thanks for that – yeah, you are right actually. There is nothing I can say to them at this point. Now I'm heading – I'm heading to the phone so I don't know what I'm going to say to them, I'm not just thinking that what should I say, because this moment is really – I need us to be with them, so, anyway I'm going to try to figure out what to say to them.

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**MG: As it turned out, the Supreme Court ruling was delayed. And then, after what felt like the longest week ever, the election results finally became clear. Throughout the long campaign, and the endless vote counting, asylum seekers and refugees barely rated a mention. Yet for Aziz and the other men on Manus, the result still took away a source of hope.**

A: Hey Michael, it's Aziz, it's Monday, I think Monday morning, 2am ... It seems weird the Liberal Party have won the election. So things are getting a bit messed up and everyone get like depressed and you know. They are not even sleeping, I could see like, many, many men, now they're ... joining some of their other friends, taking sleeping drugs. So it's really bad – bad news for all of us here, because we know that what Liberal Party did to us. So, we still don't know anythings – what are they planning to do in the future, but what we know their past was really dirty past.

**MG: The election was closer than anyone had predicted – and it threw up some other surprises, like the resurgence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party.**

Pauline Hanson: So what I'm saying is, pressure the government to say: no more Muslims in Australia. No more Muslim refugees in Australia.

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**MG: A few days after the election I went to the front door, and I spied an official-looking envelope in the post.**

MG: G'day Aziz, it's Michael here. So I just, um, went out to my letterbox and I got my passport back with a visa so, it looks like it's all going ahead, I'm gonna get to come and visit. Uh, wow, I am feeling a bit surprised. But it will be exciting to see you face to face.

A: Oh my god, good morning Michael, really? Really, you got the visa? I couldn't expect that for you to get the visa actually! Oh my god. I can't imagine to see you on Friday or on Saturday when you come here. And that's really unbelievable.

MG: It's funny, like when I booked my tickets I really had in my head that, you know, the election in Australia would be finished, and that the Supreme Court would have made its latest ruling and that maybe you would have had some sort of certainty about what was going to happen. You know maybe there would be a date on the horizon when you'd be leaving. And it would be kind of a bit of a celebration for me to meet you, at a time when you – you might have had some good news.

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MG: G'day Aziz, it is Wednesday morning, here in Melbourne ... it's pretty cold and I'm thinking about soon being very hot. [Laughs] It's kinda hard to get my head around. I'm trying to organise all the things before I go and I'm gonna go shopping today and see if I can buy you some of those clothes ... Yeah, I'm really excited about coming to, to meet you, um, it seems very kind of unimaginable to me. Like, I'm trying to picture what it's gonna be like to be on Manus, to be in Lorengau, and I, really have no idea. But I'm definitely looking forward to meeting you in person.

A: So you know, it's gonna be like an unbelievable moment, you know, from dream or whether we can say our dream it's come to the come true now, sometimes some dreams never come to the reality but this dream is come to reality ... I'm glad that now the centre is like open so I can see you outside there and I can't imagine actually how it's feel, how it will be when the first time we meet here, from messaging to meeting face to face.

[noise of coat hangers, talking, shop music]

MG: So Aziz asked me to bring him a tracksuit, some t-shirts. And I'm not much of a shopper and I'm not doing too well at the moment. Also, it's like nearly 7 o'clock on the Wednesday night and my flight is in less than 12 hours. I'm not very organised.

Shop assistant: How'd you go?

MG: Um ... [pause] Thanks.

MG: Hey Aziz. Er, now it's my turn to leave you a message in the middle of the night. Um, I have just finished packing, um, for my trip and I'm gonna get maybe three hours' sleep and then get on the first leg of my, my plane trip.

**MG: So, after four months of exchanging thousands of voice messages with Aziz, I got on a plane.**

Flight Attendant: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, Qantas flight number 197 to Port Moresby will now be boarding ...

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**MG: Next time on *The Messenger*.**

MG: Hey Aziz, I'm here on Manus Island, I'm just trying to get to my hotel. Yeah, I'll see you soon I hope.

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*To find out more about The Messenger, and to subscribe, visit [wheelercentre.com/themessenger](http://wheelercentre.com/themessenger). The Messenger is a co-production of Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre. It's produced by Michael Green, André Dao, Hannah Reich, Bec Fary, with Jon Tjhia and Sophie Black and the team at the Wheeler Centre. Theme music by Raya Slavin. Thanks to Ben Doherty and also to Claire McGregor and our team of volunteer transcribers.*

*Behind the Wire is a volunteer-run oral history project that helps people who've experienced immigration detention in Australia tell their stories. To find out more and to support their work, head to [behindthewire.org.au](http://behindthewire.org.au).*