



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 13: A Stranger In Geneva

Michael Green: From Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre, this is *The Messenger*. My name's Michael Green – and this is our final episode.

It's the second of two episodes that were originally commissioned and produced for the ABC Radio National documentary programme, *Earshot*.

And it takes us to Geneva, in Switzerland, where Aziz has just won the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders.

[Sounds of hiking in the snow]

Amidst the excitement of his win, we take a break, catch the train up the mountain to go hiking in the snow with some new friends. It's still a couple of weeks before Aziz has to return to Manus Island.

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MG: The sky's bright and clear. From up high, we can see the full sweep of the lake and the peak of Mont Blanc in France to the south. Eventually we stop for lunch, and so begins an epic snow fight.

A: Boom! My hands are empty ... [laughs]

[Snow fight sounds playing underneath]

A: [laughs] Why nobody trust me? [laughs] Hooey!

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MG: The morning after the awards ceremony, I meet up with Aziz in his hotel room, and he's still buzzing.

A: I got maybe 20 business cards or more than that. Some of them, even, they don't get a chance to shake hand so they don't give me their business card.

MG: That woman, she was crying. It's the Virgin Mary and a little keyring of the Eiffel Tower.

A: She got emotional. You know, many people got emotional actually.

MG: The award was presented by the Deputy High Commissioner of Human Rights, Kate Gilmore. She's Australian.

A: Deputy commissioner ... she, though, she got me right in the heart. Just make me feel like my mum is hugging me [laughs] ... it was really weird, man. I wasn't expecting none of this.

MG: Refugees in Iraq and Bangladesh and Libya are contacting him, out of the blue. He's on the front page of both daily newspapers in Geneva, and getting more media requests from Australia and elsewhere in Europe.

A: That's my WhatsApp it's full of messages, see ...

MG: There's 107 people who've messaged you haven't looked at ...

A: This is only WhatsApp, but imagine with Twitter and Facebook.

MG: Have you spoken to your family?

A: No. no. I didn't call my mum. I'm just busy these days ... I don't know even what to say to them.

MG: Brings up a whole lot of other emotions?

A: I need to stay away from it at the moment.

MG: His stack of business cards is just the start of it. He speaks to people from several UN bodies, NGOs and academics. On the first morning after the award, he meets with diplomats from maybe ten or twelve countries at once. But the highest profile meeting happens about a week in. We're waiting for the bus.

[Sounds of the street and engines]

A: Uh, I think we are going to meet the high commissioner. High Commissioner for Refugees, or maybe the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Because I have no idea. They just asked me to go and meet. I'm just following ...

MG: The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is Michelle Bachelet. She used to be president of Chile. In the mid 70s, Bachelet's father was killed, and she, and her mother were imprisoned and then expelled by the Pinochet dictatorship. Australia gave her a visa to live in exile.

A: I never actually been out of Manus and then I've been out of Manus and then I just got to meet with ambassadors and diplomats. So it's like shaking moment for me so I panic a little bit, but I thought to myself like, look, I mean if I am able to work through the situation on Manus I going to work through even this one.

MG: After the meeting, I meet up with Aziz inside the building. It's called Palais Wilson, and it's right on the waterfront, grand and ornate. Back in the 1920s, it was the first headquarters of the League of Nations.

A: Such an honour for me to meet with the High Commissioner ... She said we are not going to give up on you and also we are not going to give up on your friend. And it's just making me feel that, I mean, you know, people are giving me such enough energy to continue my journey and to fight as hard as I can.

MG: One of Bachelet's staff comes in, bearing t-shirts.

UN worker: So these are the shirts from the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And it says on the front of it all, 'we're all born free and equal'. Your very own.

A: Wow.

UN worker: Palais Wilson, ah, notebook.

A: Palais Wilson notebook.

UN worker: So you will never forget Palais Wilson. That is a 'free and equal' bag. This is another human rights bag that was plastic, so it'll probably hold up better.

A: Thank you very much. Wow. See, now I'm getting a gift. Palais de Wilson.

MG: Since Aziz arrived, every day in Geneva's been bright and crisp and sunny. People are telling us that, normally, February's the grey month. You can go weeks without sun. There's this cold and harsh wind they get from the north east, off the alps. They call it 'la bise', and when it comes in winter it whips water off the lake, and the water freezes mid-air.

Even though the skies are strangely calm, something bitter like 'la bise' has been buffeting Aziz.

MG: Did you expect that this trip would be as heavy as it is?

A: I wasn't expect it. I wasn't expect it would be like that. You know, if the same story you tell only one time it's okay, but you have to repeat it in every meeting you go, you have to repeat the stories – but not only the stories, but you have to even ... you go deeper to some of the most traumatise things.

MG: At the same time, you can't stop doing it. Like even though it's exhausting you.

A: That's why I'm here. In the first place. You know last night at the dinner I didn't want to bring it. I didn't even want to talk about it but ... they just ask me like 'how ...' People to understand people want to have a view. How does it feel to be in my shoes?

MG: They're telling Aziz something, too. Ever since the ceremony, everyone is telling him to stay. UN people, after those meetings. Activists in Europe and Australia. Some tell him that if he returns, the Australian government would use it as propaganda in the election campaign, as proof that Manus isn't really that

bad. And his friends on Manus are saying it isn't safe to return – he should think about his future. But if he doesn't go back to Manus, where can he go?

MG: So you just had another meeting, with UNHCR, about resettlement, or seeking asylum ...

A: Well, they're advising me of like ... to seek asylum again from Swiss government. This is really unfair.

MG: Why is it unfair?

A: Well, you know, because six years – I spent six years of my life. I found to be a refugee. So whatever you been through in the past, it's not going to be counted, so you have to go through the process, start from zero. You know, I can't spend all my life just seeking asylum from one country to another, from one country to another. What I want is resettlement for myself and for people there in Manus Island.

MG: So they are ... they are kind of trying to help you.

A: Well, I don't think this is a help! You're just trying to put me in a situation another situation. This is not a help. You know, if you ... if there is a proper help they should just offer a resettlement, and see if I will accept it or reject it.

Sometimes you get so upset and it make you just sick to your guts that even you can swear! You know. It's just a shitty system that where the richest get looked after because he has wealth, and the poor just get tortured and pushed down and pushed down, you know, to the stage even no one will acknowledge his existence. And that is what happened to us. We were poor and we don't have any wealth with us on Manus Island and Nauru, and that's why we get pushed back and pushed back, despite we fight so hard.

Every person that I met from the diplomat, to ambassadors, to the missions – every person that I met and I spoke with, he knows about Manus Island. They know about it. But what did they do? That's the question. But the problem is who you are. We are just a numbers. And the whole point is – I can just make it very short – that no country's ready to jeopardise their relationship with Australia. Full stop.

MG: The fizzy celebration of the ceremony, and the 'born free and equal' swag, it all seems like a cruel joke: 'I came here for our freedom and all I got was this lousy human rights t-shirt, notebook, and bag'.

He's also a little more frank about the meeting he had with the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

A: I mean, it just give you more, you know, I mean, time to think about how things are working and what's, what kind of world are we living on. And even she said, she said to me, uh, you know, very clearly that we're not living in a world of fairness and justice. That's what she said, we're not living in a world of fairness and justice.

And well, I walked out of the ... that meeting, you know, I can't tell, you know, whether I was happy or not. But I went to another meeting, just to see the same scenarios, you know, from one meeting to another meeting, but no one is promising for any resolutions or even attempting to solve problems. All they can do – we'll write a report and wait.

MG: As that bitter wind takes hold of Aziz, there are calm moments too, ordinary things. One night, just after we get back to his apartment, from a walk by the lake, he gets out his ironing.

A: Gosh, gosh gosh. Hard to imagine. Start your life again. Have your own house, your own family. Feel so crazy to start it. Maybe you can give it a try, but not here. Just need a little bit of time.

MG: Are you talking about me?

A: No, no, about myself. Cause you already have it. Sometimes you can ask yourself like what would be like when you have your total freedom?

MG: And?

A: There is no 'and'. It's just like that. It's a question that you always ask yourself Because it's hard to, to have the taste of the freedom and then when you have it, kind of, maybe you lose yourself in the middle.

MG: It's into Aziz's final week in Geneva, and he finds out that in a few days time, he'll get the chance to address most of the world's countries at once, at the UN's Human Rights Council. It just happens to be in session.

It's huge news. But outside of his meetings, Aziz is laid low, in a kind of contortion. His head's like a pressure chamber – constant headaches. There are those two things weighing on him. One's his own future. The other is all those meetings, and whether or not they're achieving anything for the people on Manus and Nauru. I'm trying to find that out too, in my own way, as a journalist.

Peggy Hicks: I'm Peggy Hicks. I'm the director of the division that looks at thematic issues including migration at the UN human rights office here in Geneva.

MG: She's third in charge – two rungs from Michelle Bachelet. I ask her how Australia's offshore detention centres look to the rest of the world.

PH: ... Every international body that's looked at it has said there are violations of international human rights law here. These are treaties, these are obligations that Australia has committed to. And the findings are you – you're violating it. There are recommendations saying you need to change. And Australia has been intransigent, hasn't been willing to do it. And that always raises the question of, well, where are the human rights police? You know, how do we get it to happen? And – and the reality is that you can violate treaties. There isn't anything other than that world court of public opinion really that's going to press Australia to abide by its treaty obligations.

MG: And so ... so he's going to address the ... the human rights council on Thursday. Is this a real big deal?

PH: it's a big deal in some ways and in other ways it's just part of the routine business that goes on every day at the human rights council. He's somebody who's currently experience experiencing a human rights abuse every time they take the floor at the council, to me it has an impact. But he'll speak for two minutes and at the end of his speech somebody else will speak and the council will go about its business.

MG: And is that kind of a, a little bit what like what happens when as his leaves Geneva? The show rolls on.

PH: I think those of us that work in human rights, that's ... that's what keeps us up at night. But I'm an optimist and I think that he will have touched a lot of people's lives during his time here. And each one of those will be motivated to engage, not just on his case, on the situation in Manus, but maybe on migration more generally. And all those people working together, they do make a difference in terms of, of policy and that those efforts then ultimately, you know, push governments to change.

MG: The Human Rights Council is in one of those huge round UN rooms, where everyone is listening to translations on earpieces. Aziz goes in there in the morning, and waits all day for his turn. He's sitting in a row directly behind the delegates from Vietnam, Venezuela and Vanuatu.

A: Madame Vice President, my name is Abdul Aziz. I would like to invite you to think about your life over the last six years. You may find yourself new job, start a new family or you can contribute to your family. I also had the dreams like this.

MG: Aziz is out of Manus Island, and literally speaking to the world.

A: After six years, we deserve our life back, and future. And we urge the mandates to take this up with the Australian government and the Australian government deserve to be held accountable by this council. Thank you very much.

Madame Vice-President: Thank you. And I now give the floor to the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

Speaker: Madame Vice-President, [fades out] we welcome the thematic report of special rapporteur on human right defenders ...

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MG: It's Saturday morning, just two days before Aziz's visa expires. Despite all the adulation, the speeches to the world, he has no guarantee of protection anywhere.

His choice comes down to seeking asylum in Switzerland, or returning to Manus Island.

MG: Have you made a decision?

A: I feel like I'm nearly, or maybe I made the decision now. I can say.

MG: Tell me.

A: It's a bigger one. I just ... I decided to seek asylum.

MG: Wow. How do you feel about that?

A: Well, I feel like I'm completely lost, but I mean it's the right call to make, I mean, to continue my journey of advocacy and also to continue my struggles of trying to make sure that the guys are out of that place. I mean, I think, or I see here on Geneva I have bigger opportunity of doing that. And I know it's really hard and I don't know how to explain to myself or even, even to my friends, but ... and I don't know whether a few of them are going to be upset with me. Some of them, they're going to be happy for me.

Because every time I talked to them over the phone, I just say, 'Guys, I want to come back'. And they said, you know, 'It's your decision, but at the end of the day, we don't want you to come back because we feel like, I mean, it's, it's hard for us to guarantee your protections if you come back to this place'.

So for that reason, I mean, they said you care about us in the last six years, and you managed to fight for us from the day one we'd been in detention until the day when you are at the moment. So I mean, it's a time for you to take your time, think about it and whatever decision that you make we're happy and we are not going to blame you.

MG: And what do you, like, feel in your heart when you hear those messages?

A: Um, it's like, I mean, I feel like I'm not alone and also people do care about me, and as I do care about them, and people always try to make sure that my safety is

their first concern and as I do like here. So it was a – I mean, I guess, I don't know, but I've just lost myself in the words, you know?

This is the challenge I'm facing and to forgive myself, it's the only way I see it now to forgive myself is when I made sure or when I make sure everyone is out of that place. That's a time where you can ... I will forgive myself, and I cannot do anything or neither even start my life until those people are out of that place.

MG: After this conversation, Aziz goes to bed and doesn't leave his room the whole afternoon and night.

The booking for his flight to Manus comes and goes. The Swiss detention centre's an hour and a half's drive from Geneva. Michael Khambatta, the director of the award, hires a car.

Aziz is sitting low and quiet in the front seat, staring out the window, scrolling on his phone.

MG: Are you watching Q&A?

A: They are talking about the ... yeah ... about the Catholic.

MK: This is depressing. You have enough problems. You don't need to get them too.

MG: Finally, we reach a small town that strikes me as very unpleasant – at least today. A selection of drab office buildings and brown fields, below a hill. The GPS says we've arrived, and Aziz says nothing.

MG: There's just a lot of anonymous looking buildings.

MK: Buildings.

MG: Could be like school houses or old hospitals.

MK: I think it's up here. Let's park and see where we end up.

MG: It's miserable, wet and windy for the first time since Aziz arrived in Switzerland. The place is actually an old psychiatric hospital.

Security guard: [Speaking in French]

MK: He said you can't record. You can't record anything anymore.

MG: Alright. Okay.

MG: We walk towards a run-down old building at the bottom of the compound. The guard leads Aziz to a converted shipping container, painted white and blue. It doesn't have any windows. We say goodbye and he smiles, what seems like a genuine smile, and he goes through the door.

A couple of hours later he texts me that he's still in that little room. He writes: 'Am nervous'. Later, he says they've taken him to a high security building:

'My life's meant to be like that, bro.'

'A building full of security guards and very strong doors.'

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[News montage]

Announcer: The Coalition will govern for a third term after an extraordinary, unexpected victory in the Federal election.

Reporter: Behrouz Boochani says morale has taken a turn for the worse.

Behrouz Boochani: About 50 people attempt suicide and self-harm in Manus Island and some of them ...

Announcer: ...abolish the medevac legislation. Peter Dutton's told ...

Peter Dutton: We can only clean it up if the Labor Party support the government in the Senate to abolish this bill ...

Reporter: Protestors in Sudan have been manning sit-ins around the country for weeks as they campaign for a full transition from military rule to democracy ...

MG: In Switzerland, Aziz passes his sixth Ramadan in an immigration facility, far away from his family. His process goes on – sometimes the signs seem encouraging, other times, disheartening. Until one day, in June.

[Sound of phone ringing]

A: Hey! [laughs]

MG: Aziz! What's going on?

A: Hey buddy. Well, I was just planning to call you and tell you this, but ... you call now. Is it late in Australia? What time is it now?

MG: It's 11.30 at night. It's, um, it's late but there's some things that, uh, I'm willing to stay up for.

A: [Laughing] Hey man, I, um ... it's just a great news. I heard, uh, from my lawyer. Okay. Like it's about 20 minutes ago and she called me and she said, 'Look, hey man, congratulations. I mean, you are being granted asylum and you've been given a permit B'. I went to the library and sitting in the library and then she rang.

MG: How did you feel in that moment, and what were you thinking?

A: Well, honestly I feel like someone stabbed me on my heart. Like something like my heart started beating so fast.

MG: Yeah.

A: And I was so excited. Even the guys who were sitting next to me, they were just like, 'Why? You know what's wrong with this guy? He's just smiling for nothing'. You know, I started smile, it started smiles and then I walked out of the library and then the phone start ringing. So like start calling people and then I thought like, guys,

hold on, and just let me call my mom first. My mom, guys, one second and then I'm ... I'm going to call you.

MG: Wow.

A: This is really, *wow*. It is really, *really* wow, man. Me either, me either. I can't believe it. Now it's a permanent residency. So I'm in Switzerland now. Yeah. So I'm like, my future is here in Switzerland now.

Uh, you know, you know, you know what Michael – like, this is really, really, I mean tonight, I'm sure I'm going to sleep. Really. I want to have the good, good sleep tonight.

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MG: A month later, I visit Aziz again in Geneva.

A: We are in the building, this is part of the university, and today we have a meeting which it's about welcoming the students who are going to enrol in the next semester of the university.

MG: He's about to begin a six-week French intensive course at the University of Geneva. Once his French is good enough, he'll have a chance to enrol.

MG: [under] Is it exciting to be studying ... ?

A: It is still exciting but also a bit depressed, because it's been a while I've been away from the education and now I don't know how I'm going to react mentally and being back at uni.

MG: Bit nervous?

A: And one of my goal is just to finish my education, and now I'm nearly stepping in to start my dream, to make it come true. Back to university, and in Geneva. Wow.

[Sound of footsteps on stairs]

MG: Aziz tells me that since he was granted permanent residency, he's been super busy. Most days he's got meetings about the situation on Manus. He did an advocacy training course for a fortnight, and spoke again at the Human Rights Council.

[Sound of classroom]

A: [Whispers] Do you have a pen?

[Room goes silent, man starts speaking in French]

MG: He hasn't had time to sort out his own life – he's still living in the asylum seeker accommodation on the outskirts of town. He's eligible for a rental subsidy, and he's started looking at ads, but it's really hard for anyone to find a flat in Geneva. He's also trying to figure out how, and where, he can meet up with his family.

A: It is really like such a big things that I'm dealing with in my life at the moment. And I'm just sort of like, I mean the six years that I actually, the gap of the six years, it's become such a huge thing that I don't know like how to fill it up or from where to start.

The feeling of guilty is still with me. I am still carrying a weight on my shoulder. But I start also having a positive feeling sometimes, about the awareness that now it's happening here, people are learning about what is happening back there on Manus.

MG: Most nights, he stays up late, to coordinate things with lawyers and doctors in the morning Australian-time.

A: I mean, like, it's not such an easy things. I'm just running and running and running. So I'm want to keep going, you know? I feel if I just stopped, if I stopped from running, I feel like I'm not going to make it through. So I feel like, okay, let me keep running. Let's keep the blood pumping.

MG: It's summertime in Switzerland. On a warm Sunday afternoon, we meet up at one of the swimming spots in town, at the junction of the two rivers. One of

them's crystal clear, the other one's cloudy. The waters run fast, and as you look downstream, you can see the colours mix.

A: People following the lake, you don't know where they are going, but just like they are just following. Wow. This is really beautiful.

[Music starts playing on PA by the river]

MG: There's a dreamy vibe. Young people, picnics, barbeques and drinks. Bare skin, marijuana smoke. The riverbank is lush and leafy.

But just a few metres away, an older guy starts yelling at a young man sitting by the water – abusing him for the colour of his skin. Telling him to go back to Senegal.

[Lyrics come up: '... *always a stranger, you know I'm the changer, the re-arranger, I'm always the stranger, I'm always a stranger, I'm always a stranger ...*']

MG: Some people intervene. Aziz sighs. Then he gets on with business, keeps the blood pumping, starts tapping out an email on his phone to a Swiss barrister he's met, asking if he'll come to a house inspection with him on Monday – and vouch for him to get a place.

[music fades slowly]

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A: Hi everyone! It's been a long time. It's me, Aziz, from Geneva, Switzerland.

Thank you very much for listening to The Messenger. And if you've missed anything along the way, you can subscribe and find all of our episodes, plus extra content, at wheelercentre.com/themessenger. And if you liked this show, please share it with your friends so that you can help us to spread the word around.

The Messenger is a co-production of Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre. ABC sound engineer Melissa May worked on this episode. The music is by Hour House.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who's been involved in the four years since we started working on it. And I also want to thank all of our listeners.

There are many more voices to this story. There are happy voices and there are sad voices. And there are voices that are repeatedly calling for dignity; there are voices that are repeatedly calling for justice and equality among the refugees. And also, there are the voices of the men who are trying to encourage each other ... of the men who are sticking together ... the men who are desperately fighting for their freedoms. For their freedoms, and the freedoms of everyone in that place.

The people who Australia sent to Papua New Guinea and Nauru are now in many places today. Some are in Brisbane, in Melbourne, in Adelaide, in Perth, in America, in Canada or in New Zealand. Some are still in Nauru, or in Port Moresby. Some are still in Bomana prison, still fighting.

Our fight hasn't finished yet. We are only mid-way. And so I strongly encourage all our supporters – all the people who stood on our side and fought for our freedom and dignity in the last six-and-a-half years – I also want to encourage you to continue that fight.

We are here. Your voice and my voice will make a big difference.

We have a lot to say.

But I also want to thank you once again from the bottom of my heart for all the love and support that we have received from *The Messenger* podcast. I want to encourage you strongly to share this podcast with your friends, either in Australia or overseas. Thank you very much.

To find out more about The Messenger, and to subscribe, visit 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.