



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 12: Flight From Manus

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

It's been a while since our last episode, for reasons you're about to hear. The next two episodes will be The Messenger's last. They were originally commissioned and produced for the ABC Radio National programme, Earshot.

Let's get into it.

[Sounds of an airport waiting corridor]

MG: It's February of this year, 2019. I'm waiting in the Arrivals area of the airport in Geneva, Switzerland.

MG: So there are two doors that Aziz might come through. It's now 7.30am. It's coming up to an hour since he landed. I'm feeling kind of nervous.

MG: In our last episode, I mentioned that Aziz had been shortlisted for a major international award for human rights defenders. The government of Papua New Guinea allowed him to fly to Switzerland, briefly, for the award ceremony.

MG: So there's still some other people waiting. Holding up signs. Someone with a sign for 'Mr and Mrs Draper' over there. Someone for 'Corey'.

MG: Aziz is only allowed to visit Geneva for two weeks ... then, he has to return to Manus Island – back to the same situation he's being celebrated for campaigning against.

MG: I think I can see him; I think I just saw him. I think he just walked way back through the baggage carousel.

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MG: It's over a year since I last saw Aziz, and that was on Manus Island. Before we return to the airport waiting hall, we're going to step back to that last time I saw Aziz. I managed to visit the island at the time Aziz and the other refugees were refusing to leave their abandoned detention centre. There were several hundred men in there and they had no power or supplies, but they were smuggling in food, catching rainwater and digging wells. They smuggled me in there too, by boat in the middle of the night.

Abdul Aziz Muhamat: That's the key.

MG: Wow.

[Sound of gate clanging]

MG: So did you buy the chain and the lock?

A: Yeah we buy the chain and we buy the lock. This is Delta compound.

MG: Delta

MG: Aziz showed me his room. On his wall, he'd written inspirational quotes from Martin Luther King, Obama, Gandhi and Mandela.

A: And another thing that I would like to show you, so this is a map that I drew about my journey and on top of that map, so I say 'I miss you mum'. And this is the date that I left Sudan, 11 July 2013. All way I came to Indonesia and then move all way, to Australia and then I get deported back to PNG and then from PNG now, you can see this sign, so I am on my way again to Australia. That means my journey hasn't finished yet; my journey is still going on.

MG: He gave me a long tour, showed me their food storeroom and their wells. They were managing somehow – running their own prison, as a protest for freedom. But it was a huge risk – actually a matter of life and death. I asked Aziz if he was sure he was making the right decision.

A: And just let's be clear that when you believe in one thing, that something is wrong, then food and water is not really important ... sometimes, when you believe something is really wrong and you want to make it right, you have to sacrifice.

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[Montage of sounds of the men being evicted from the detention centre]

MG: I was still on Manus, nearly two weeks later, after the men were all moved out by force. Aziz came and met me in my hotel room in the centre of town.

A: Until this moment, I couldn't believe that I'm here in Lorengau, you know, and even this morning I was talking to my roommate and I just ... things look weird for me, and I just miss the life that I've been on for the last 24, ah, days that we were in Lombrum. Like, we had a lot to share and we had a lot to do, you know, from morning 'til night time.

But, um ... also I have lost quite a lot of my energy because I wasn't expect the move to be like that, and it just got violent.

MG: In the months that followed, Aziz was really low. He'd put all his hopes and energy into those three-and-a-half weeks of purpose. And now, there was nothing but a new indefinite future on Manus Island. He still hadn't been interviewed for resettlement in the US. And anyway, they didn't seem to be accepting people from Sudan.

Someone sent me a link to an international prize for human rights defenders, and with Aziz's permission, I coordinated an entry for him.

[Recording of Aziz making a speech to a protest in Melbourne via phone]

MG: Like the five years before, Aziz kept working: speaking at rallies by phone, contacting advocates in Australia, organising men to see doctors, and also, trying to pass the time.

[Recording of Aziz, replying to phone messages and organising for sick people to see doctors]

[Recording of Aziz playing cards and listening to music from Sudan]

MG: This is a recording he made one night, playing cards and listening to music with his friends.

[Music peaks, then continues under and fades]

MG: It was around then, that he found out that he'd been shortlisted for that prize – the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. Not only that, but they wanted to see if they could get him to the ceremony. For months, it seemed preposterous, but the awards organisation kept looking into it.

It was only a week before Aziz had to leave, that he committed to going. It was February this year. On the morning of his flight, he was in Port Moresby, trying to find somewhere with a colour printer so he could print a letter he had from the Swiss government. He had a PNG issued travel document, but no proper passport, or visa.

A: I already checked in, finished my checking in. So just trying to relax and waiting for my flight.

MG: And then, so what's your route? You go from Port Moresby to Manila, yeah?

A: Yeah. And then from Manila to, to Doha. So, and then from Doha to Geneva.

MG: It's crazy.

A: It's really crazy man.

MG: Do you feel like you're going to make it?

A: Well, I don't know actually. I don't know.

MG: And how did, like how do you feel?

A: I feel really nervous, nervous. I really feel scared by myself alone, you know? And I don't know what will happen when I land in Geneva.

MG: I was going to meet him in the airport at Doha, for the final flight to Switzerland, but when I arrived there, I got a message saying the airline hadn't let him on his connection in Manila.

So, a day late, then an hour delayed, on a freezing cold morning, I'm in the waiting hall with the boss of the award organisation, who's also called Michael. Michael Khambatta. And Aziz comes through the automatic doors.

MG: Hey, hey there he is! [laughs] Nice to see you. Welcome to Geneva.

A: Thanks, man.

Michael Khambatta: Aziz!

MG: How are you?

MK: Been a long trip.

A: It is a long trip and I'm so exhausted at the moment, and I – all I can say is I'm just freaking out now. Can I get something to wear please? Warm.

MK: Let's get you a jacket, first of all. I've got boots for you, but you don't need them right now.

A: In Manilla they stopped [me] from the plane because, they ask me like, why you don't even have a visa. And I told them that I've been informed that I should get my visa on arrival. And they say we want a visa, so we can't put you on the plane unless you'll have a visa. And then they put me in a small room upstairs, and I was freaking. I thought they were going to send me back to Papua New Guinea again.

And I was like okay, let's just wait and see what will happen. It's just make me sad that after six years even I don't have an identity that where I can use it, you know.
[sighs]

MG: So now we're walking to the train.

A: Make me feel like, oh, where am I? Where am I?

MK: It's a bit different than home isn't it?

A: Oh. It looks ... there's a huge difference. Just makes me feel like I don't belong to this spaces.

MK: I'll just get you a ticket.

[Sound of train underneath]

MG: I find out later that it's actually the first time Aziz's been on a train. But it's only a very short ride, just one stop, to Geneva's central station. So before long, he's in his hotel room.

[Sound of walking, then door closing, entering room]

A: And last time I met with you in Manus, I say a few words to you like hopefully we will see each other somewhere, but um, it's weird that today we are here in Geneva. And you are in Geneva, and I'm here in Geneva as well. [Laughs.] And I have never been in a such a fancy room in many years.

MG: His room on Manus has two bunk beds in it for three people and it's smaller than the little dining area in the hotel room.

A: Microwave.

MG: Yeah, so there's a little ki-

A: Microwave. Six years I never even touch a microwave.

MG: He has his own kitchen with dishes and cutlery and cups here; on Manus he shares all that with nine other guys. They share a toilet too.

A: It's such a weird and crazy thing to be in a bathroom like this, man.

MG: One with an actual mirror.

A: The mirror, they remove the mirror because you're going to commit suicide with the mirror.

MG: We go to the window which looks out onto the platforms of Geneva station. The closest is only about 20 metres away, right at eye level. It's three hours to the German border, or the other way, just over three hours on a high speed train all the way to Paris.

A: People in and out of the stations. This is really a perfect view, a view that even, I haven't seen it for years. Last time when I saw a train it was in Sudan and ... and from that time like I'm just trying to picture how the train look like, and all I could see it's on the movie, but I can ... I was hoping that maybe I can get on the train one day [laughs] and now I'm in the room with the view of the train, you know, going in and out of the station.

MG: There's just one leaving right now.

A: Yeah, yeah there's one leaving right now and I feel awkward, you know and I... And I'm just trying to process it through, but I don't know for how long it will take for me to process that. But I have to, I have to accept that this is the fact, I'm in Geneva. [Laughs]

MG: Your roommates – what, what did they say when you told them that you were going to Switzerland?

A: They did not believe it. No one even believe it. They don't believe it. And then when I did it, they just told me that, 'Okay, we didn't believe you at first, but now we do, but do not come back'. They said like, 'Man, you should seek asylum there'.

I cannot do it because I have only, you know, two weeks entering on the country. This is not just such an easy thing that you raise your hand and you say, okay, here I'm going to seek asylum and people are going to say, okay, the door [is] open, come in. No. Policies are changing, even in Europe at the moment, the rules of law are changing due to the global crisis of the refugees at the moment.

And I just feel like, you know, uh, the reason why I've been recognised, I mean one of these three finalists is because of the, I mean the work that I did on Manus. I'm glad that I'm here in Geneva and I'm going to be in the United Nations. And I will go back again to Manus and tell people that look, the international community, they have already recognised our struggles.

MG: Is there a small part of you that like looks at that train just leaving there and thinks ah, you should just get the hell on that train?

A: Well, I wish if we could just, you know, get on that train and, and once we get in we can just see everyone, you know, all the Manus guys are on that train. It will make me so excited you know. Because I just feel like, you know, I left my soul back there, you know. Personally I'm here, but my heart is still in Manus. Yep.

And I've been just thinking about what's going to happen because I left people in a such a horrible conditions and I wish that like, you know, nothing will happen to those people until I go back to see them again.

MG: But the people who brought him here are feeling awkward that Aziz has to return. When we were waiting at the airport, Michael Khambatta, the awards boss, said he was very uncomfortable about it. But it had been Aziz's choice.

In the hotel lobby, Aziz meets Hans Thoolen, the co-founder of the Martin Ennals Award. Before Aziz has even put down his suitcase, Hans is theorising on the predicament. The Australian government, he says, would probably even prefer it if Aziz didn't return.

Hans Thoolen: Your problem is that they're much more afraid you'll come back. A troublemaker like you? Back? Stay here. You know. Nobody's interested once you're in safety. It's a terrible thing to say, but tough politics.

A: It is very very tough politics that we've been through and ... [fades under]

MG: Hans is alarmingly frank. Aziz is still standing there with us, and Hans just goes on, explaining to me what he means.

HT: He is put in a terrible dilemma if you want to put it in a ... The cause requires one thing and his personal happiness requires something else. And these choices are terrible for people to make. And I admire him greatly because, the fact that he says I want to go back to take care of my friends and my fellow human beings, that makes him a human rights defender. Defending your own rights is ... nothing wrong, but it doesn't make you a human rights defender.

MG: Aziz is meant to be having a rest day, but instead, he has a meeting scheduled. So we head there together on the tram.

MG: Look at those! Look at those mountains with the snow!

A: Oh my gosh, man. I wish there was snow, some snow here in the city.

MG: Uh, be careful what you wish for. [Laughs] Check this out.

A: Kidding me?

MG: Okay, so we just pulled up at the final tram stop and there's a huge poster of the Martin Ennals award with Aziz on it.

MG: It's about a meter and a half tall and three metres wide. We're right near UN HQ, the grand building with all the flags. It turns out these billboards are all over the city, wherever we go – another day, I see three on one corner.

MG: Oh my God, I'm going to have to take a photo of this. Wait, wait – look at me. And like bend down a little bit and, like, put your head next to your head. You're going to get, like, you're going to get spotted around the city. People are going to be like, *you're that guy from the billboards*.

MG: Just as I say it, someone recognises him. A woman walking past to get the tram.

A: She looked at the picture and she looked at me she was just in rush, otherwise she was gonna come and shake hands.

MG: Aziz goes to his first meeting – kind of a meet-and-greet with higher ups from the UN’s refugee agency. Afterwards, we get back on the tram. It’s only his first day, but already his face is all over the city. And important people want to listen to him.

A: It’s finally I mean it feel like ... we are getting to somewhere. It’s just feel like we are getting to somewhere.

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[Sound of Aziz biting a croissant]

MG: Aziz is just eating a croissant with Nutella ... looks pretty good!

MG: This morning, Aziz’s got interviews scheduled with two newspaper journalists. And, the judges for the award are meeting in private, to decide who the winner’ll be.

I haven’t mentioned yet the other two candidates. There’s Eren Keskin from Turkey, she’s been a lawyer and human rights activist for more than three decades. And Marino Cordoba Berrio from Columbia, who fights for the rights of Afro-Colombian people – more than 400 leaders in those communities have been murdered in the last three years. When Marino’s in Colombia, he needs bodyguards around the clock.

Eren isn’t here in Geneva. She’s just been sentenced to twelve-and-a-half years jail for publishing articles that were said to have degraded the Turkish nation and insulted the president. She’s free, pending an appeal, but doesn’t want to leave Turkey. She’s very glamorous in her photos, with lots of eye makeup and a big pile of hair atop her head. The second contender Marino is tall and imposing and taciturn in person, with a shaven head and a crisp suit. Looks a bit like a mid-career Sidney Poitier.

And then there's Aziz. He's 26 years old, with broad shoulders and skinny legs. He'd be a dapper dresser if he could, but after years stuck on a tropical island, he arrived in a t-shirt. He doesn't even own a jacket.

A: You know exciting to be in Geneva, and having a breakfast.

MG: There goes the last of the croissant.

A: Uh huh.

MG: The journalist arrives for the interview.

Journalist: I was struck by the situation in, in the, in this camp, the policy of Australia towards asylum seekers. It seems quite odd to me. It's very extreme, but maybe I didn't understand very well. I don't know. He will explain to me ...

A: It's a little bit difficult ... [fades out]

MG: I go to check in with him a few hours later, after he finishes those interviews.

A: Now I think we go for lunch, come back, and get ready.

MG: What's the deal with the award?

A: [Laughs.] Well, soon you will hear some good news. I just got a call from Michael that he say, I won it. [Laughs.] Unbelievable, man.

MG: Whoa. What did he say?

A: Well, he just ... no, he called me and he say, hey, the jury make the decision that you are the, I mean, the laureate.

MG: The laureate.

A: I was shaking and I was like, *hello, what did you say? Are you? Hello! I can't hear! What?* And he say you are the laureate, and I was like *oooooooooooooh my God! Am I?* And you know it's like feeling of exciting. I mean it's an historical moment that

where we got the, I mean, the international community attention and we got the Australian government attention. And um, it's a victory and this is not just one victory, but two victory at a time.

MG: The other victory for Aziz is something that happened in Australia. Overnight, the lower house passed the 'medevac bill' against the will of the Morrison government.

A: So they are going to take it to the Senate to be, to make it as a law in Australia. And at the moment we have a green light that all the sick men on Manus Island and Nauru, will be going to Australia for medical treatment. And plus the award here, it change everything. This is the acknowledgement that we were looking for in a six years despite our fight and despite our resistance. And I feel like my dream it's become true now.

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MG: So it's Wednesday afternoon, nearly 3 o'clock. So it's like three hours before the big speech. Aziz is trying to decide what to wear. He's looking a bit stressed out.

A: Really stressed out ... sometimes when you're trying to go somewhere it's like you need to try even every types of clothes that you have to make sure it looks okay.

MG: And how many people are going to be there?

A: Well, according to what I heard, I mean, there will be like a thousand people there. So ,which is going to stress me out with the ... about what I'm going to say. Alright. We don't have time. She is down there waiting for us.

MG: We rush out so he can get to a TV interview.

A: And one thing that I like about these people is that they are tied up with the time. Time it means everything to them. Like ... [laughs]. Time on Manus doesn't matter for us. You know? Time doesn't matter for us. We don't even, like, care about time. At all.

HT: Claire! Claire! He's here. Sorry. They were looking for you.

MG: To get to the location, we walk through the town centre, across a bridge over Geneva's famous lake and through the streets to a busy park, opposite the opera house. Old men are playing chess, and kids are ice skating. Aziz looks up and has a rare moment marvelling at the scenery.

A: This is a beautiful place. Honestly. This is a beautiful place.

MG: Otherwise, the whole time he's here, he keeps his head down, and his earbuds in. We talk about this another day, a bit later on.

A: So honestly when I walk around I just, I don't even have that kind of feeling, you know? The other thing, you should know that, you know, whatever, what do we call feeling? We don't have a feeling now. It's too late now. And you're not going to have it until you find yourself, like, you're having your freedoms, you're having your proper freedom. That's the time when you start feeling.

MG: When I hear you say that, it's like I have this image of myself, of you like walking around the streets of Geneva, in a little kind of fog or something, and you can't like take it all in.

A: Uh, it's little bit like that. Exactly. You know, like you're in a place like yo now you feel like you'll have a freedom of two weeks, or freedom of maximum three weeks. Well, you can't take that, whatever joy of the freedom that you get in the three weeks inside you, because there's no place inside you that can fit, you know, that joy of freedom here.

So what we got is we've got a dead blood inside our body, inside our heart, inside our feeling, cover everything. Cover everything. Need time to have a proper feeling of, I mean, what is it like to be in a free world, in a free places, and you can have an equal and fair treatment like everybody else.

So anyway, and all I'm doing is I'm just living the moment and walk away. One day come, another day pass. Today, tomorrow, the next day. When my time's over, I

head out of here. Everything that I saw here, I leave it behind. Yeah, very difficult. It's very difficult not to be too excited about it, and not to be too sad about it.

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MG: We're at the hall, before the ceremony. It's got balconies and a high, curved ceiling, and the rows of chairs are packed in tight. Aziz is practicing his lines and freaking out.

A: We are an experiment for the whole world. We are an experiment. An experiment. For the whole world is watching to see how cruel democracy can be on behalf of its people. When I arrived in Manus. I was 20. And now I'm 26. I'm 26. We have had a blind life. And dark future.

Just nervous. I'm shaking. I need to go to the place like hot place, quiet ...

MK: You're stressed. Come with me.

A: I need to have a coffee and be in a quiet place.

MG: Backstage, a member of the executive council of Geneva introduces herself. Aziz is pretty impressed.

A: It's unbelievable that I might be able to meet such a big person. She used to be ... she's the ex-mayor this one. Behind me. Behind me.

MG: Oh.

A: That's the mayor of this city.

MG: Oh.

A: Geneva. Such an honour.

MG: The guests file in, and suddenly, it's showtime.

[Sound of Aziz's footsteps as he climbs the stage]

A: I feel a little bit cold and shaking, so don't get me wrong, it's my first time to be in a cold place. Bonjour Madame and Monsieur. Salaam. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Thank you ... [Fades under]

MG: The awards coordinators had asked him for a written version of his speech beforehand. He'd worked on it all morning. But standing up on stage, he totally ignores it and goes into full preacher mode.

A: We are known to the Australian government as a numbers. They have erased our names. They have stolen our identity. And they gave us a number. And guess what is my number? My name ... it's not number. My name is Q N K zero zero two, and if I don't use that number, I don't get water to drink. If I don't use that number, I don't get food to eat. And if I don't use that number I don't get medical access ...

MG: All these diplomats and dignitaries, a cross-section of heavies from the global diplomatic community: he has them in the palm of his hand. Later, a diplomat tells me he thought Aziz was 'Mandela-like' that night.

A: [Fade up] ... They are waiting for me to share this award with them and to let them know that the international community acknowledge our existence, our resilience, our struggle, and most importantly, it's going to be an historical moment for us. Thank you very much. Once again, thank you very much.

[Applause]

MG: The standing ovation goes on and on. And then the emcee announces that it's Aziz's birthday on the weekend, and she gets all of these dignitaries singing happy birthday to this young man, who, until a few days ago, was one of over a thousand others detained on two Pacific Islands, just trying to keep himself alive with no idea if he'd ever be able to leave. It's incredible. And ridiculous.

[Crowd singing 'Happy birthday']

MG: Afterwards, he's swamped with well-wishers. They teem around him for nearly two hours, shaking hands, taking photos, and giving him their business cards.

A: Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thanks. Thank you very much. Nice to meet you. Okay.

Woman 1: Sister from Kenya, can I have a picture? I am so proud of you, keep it up.

Woman 2: Another sister from Africa, so proud of you. We will keep you in our mind.

MG: One woman from Spain begins to cry and presses a picture of the Virgin Mary into his palm.

Woman 3: It's our mother, and we protect you all the way.

Woman 4: Aziz.

Woman 5: Aziz.

Woman 4: Aziz.

A: Yeah.

Woman 4: With the prize. With the prize.

A: Come in. Come in guys.

Man: Aziz. Bonsoir, Aziz.

A: Bonsoir, ça va bien. Al Hamdulillah.

[Fades out]

MG: Geneva is ringed by snow capped mountains, but every one of them is in France. So when Aziz leaves and looks up, he'll see forbidden land. They love him inside the hall, but outside, he still isn't free. And that will soon become very clear.

Next time, on *The Messenger* ...

A: 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.

André Dao: I'm André Dao – one of the producers of *The Messenger*. Subscribe to *The Messenger*, and find all of our episodes, plus extra content, at wheelercentre.com/themessenger.

***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.**

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A: Well, the technique is: first you need to cut a piece of bread. Stick it on the, ah, the fork. And then take it to the cheese. Roll it two times, three times. [laughs] Until it gets like wet. And then take it out of there. But you cannot just take it directly to your mouth. So you have to keep it, you know, get cold, little bit. And then you try it! It's really nice. It's just ... the name is just little bit awkward you know? ... 'Fondue.'

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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.