

# Refugees mount protests and escapes at remote Australian detention centre

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Overcrowding and inhumane conditions have led to a series of escapes and protests at the Australian government's Immigration Detention Centre at Port Hedland. As of last month, over 690 refugees were being detained at the 700-bed centre, in the country's remote northwest.

The facility resembles a military-style concentration camp. In a rare media report, the *West Australian* provided a glimpse of the conditions. "Usually it is two to a room, but with overcrowding, up to four men live in a room designed for one person," the newspaper related. "Fences are lined with barbed wire and the cyclone screens which cover the windows give the centre a military air."

Since June there have been three separate escapes and two major protests reported in the media. In June, 11 refugees escaped. In July about 30 Chinese refugees, who were being kept in isolation, barricaded themselves in a common room in an hour-long standoff with security officers. They were protesting their impending deportation. They had also been denied access to telephones.

In late July, 26 refugees, believed to be from China, escaped less than 24 hours after a breakout by four refugees in the early hours of the previous morning. Immigration security officials and local police were mobilised and most escapees were quickly caught.

Marion Le, from the Independent Council for Refugee Advocacy, said the centre had become a flashpoint for violence. "Overcrowding in this sort of situation when people are already highly stressed is going to lead to some really serious problems. These people don't speak the same language and have different backgrounds, and they're in the middle of a stressful process which they don't always understand."

But the response of the Howard government, backed by the opposition Labor Party immigration spokesman Con Sciacca, has been to call for the establishment of a new facility to cater for a further 200 refugees.

According to media reports, the town of Kambalda in Western Australia's eastern goldfields has expressed interest in providing a facility, in the hope of creating employment following the loss of hundreds of jobs due to the falling price of gold and the subsequent closure of a number of mines.

The previous Labor government established the Port Hedland detention centre in the early 1990s. Purchased from Australian transnational company BHP for \$1 million, the centre is divided into nine accommodation blocks. Designed originally to house single workers employed by BHP Iron Ore, the rooms are no

larger than jail cells. BHP workers often referred to them as "dog boxes". The nine blocks were separated from each other in 1995 by barbed-wire internal fences. Three of the blocks now serve as isolation units for new arrivals in order to prevent the refugees from communicating with each other.

Port Hedland is situated 1,641 kilometres north-west of Perth, on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. The region has a mean maximum temperature in the summer months of 45 degrees celsius. The facility was privatised by the Howard government in December 1997 and is managed and operated by Australasian Correctional Management, a subsidiary of the American security giant Wackenhut Corporation. Wackenhut manages more than 30 detention centres and jails worldwide, including prisons in the Australian states of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.

The refugees currently imprisoned at Port Hedland come from a number of countries. Although many are from China, others have arrived from Afghanistan, Turkey, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Somalia—countries ravaged by war, political persecution, ethnic cleansing, mass unemployment, poverty and starvation.

Aside from the intolerable overcrowded conditions that the refugees—men, women and children—have had to endure, reports have emerged describing the physical and psychological impact of detention.

In May this year the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee commenced an inquiry into the operation of Australia's refugee and humanitarian programs. The inquiry was begun after the government's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) had received 58 complaints since 1990 of human rights abuses from refugees and individuals and groups representing them. From January 1996, complaints relating to Port Hedland increased by 1,000 percent.

As part of the inquiry, HREOC produced a report titled, *Those who've come across the seas: detention of unauthorised arrivals*, tabled in federal parliament in May 1998. The report begins by quoting the experiences of a Chinese refugee awaiting deportation:

"In the last year of my detention at Port Hedland I was in a bad state emotionally. Most nights I would lie in bed feeling nervous wondering about what would happen to us. We had not heard anything for a long time about our court case and felt we could be deported any day. The guards checking on us every night also disturbed our sleep. I would prefer to stay in Australia but it has taken so long to get a response from the department I have lost

heart. That is why I requested to go back to China. I don't want to go back to China because of what happened to me there and because my son would have to be cared for by someone else as I will be imprisoned... I have been in detention for one year and still do not know what is happening.”

The main issues raised in the complaints were:

- \* the length and indefinite nature of the period of detention and the effects of this on detainees' physical and mental health

- \* people not being told of their right to request access to legal advice when they are taken into detention

- \* delays in prisoners receiving responses to requests for legal assistance to make applications to stay in Australia

- \* people being held in isolation from other parts of the immigration detention centre and the world outside

- \* the use of force to control disturbances and restrain people

- \* the general conditions of detention, such as food, medical services, education, recreation facilities, the level of security, privacy, sleeping arrangements and accommodation of detainees of different religions

The most serious findings of human rights violations related to the segregation of new prisoners and the inappropriate management of detainees' behavior, including the misuse of observation rooms, physical and chemical restraints and transfers to police cells and prisons.

One Vietnamese refugee held since July 1994 wrote: “Unlimited time of the imprisonment and other problems make us feel like we are dangerous criminals. Luckily we are not. The more we are staying, the more our spirit is going to be worse seriously. At last my friend ... tried to commit suicide by taking tablets on 13 May 1997. Luckily he was rescued on time...”

“We are not [allowed] to take excursion normally ... [and inside] the camp fences are everywhere so that we cannot go back and forth comfortably. In Galang camp (Indonesia) I had been on the beach every Sunday and public holiday for the whole day without police watching.”

A Chinese woman who had arrived in 1995 in Darwin by boat lodged a complaint that she was attacked by security guards after taking an extra piece of fruit from the compound's dining room. Despite the Cantonese speaking woman's attempts to explain to the security guards that she was given the piece of fruit by one of the kitchen staff and repeated requests for an interpreter, she was escorted to an observation room. There, according to the guards, she removed her clothing and attempted to hang herself with her clothes. A mental health nurse working at the centre was called on to administer intravenous sedatives to her.

In another case, a group of 22 hunger strikers facing deportation attempted mass suicide by slashing their wrists after taunts and verbal abuse by a manager. They were handcuffed by security guards, put in solitary confinement and some were injected with sedatives. The use of sedatives is said to be commonplace when detainees are being prepared for deportation.

HREOC was told by security guards that the Department of Immigration's policy for those involved in hunger strikes and protests was to confine them to isolation and withdraw privileges.

Port Hedland is not the only cause for concern. The HREOC report found serious human rights violations with the use of

Villawood Stage One and Perth detention centres for long-term imprisonment. It condemned the lack of privacy, inadequate recreation facilities, poor educational opportunities and restrictions on movement.

The Villawood centre is located on the site of the disused Westbridge Migrant hostel in south-western Sydney. It is made up of two segregated blocks—Stage One and Stage Two. Stage One is described as a purpose-built medium security detention centre. Stage Two is referred to as a low security facility. According to the HREOC report, refugees are transferred from Stage Two to Stage One if their behavior becomes difficult to manage, they have a medical condition or they are awaiting deportation. Villawood is used primarily for the detention of people arriving at airports or who have overstayed their visas.

One Iraqi refugee in Villawood Stage One wrote the following in his complaint to HREOC:

“I came to Australia for protection and they treat me like a dog. It is not right. Here now at Stage One, they do not have private rooms, no library, no system at all. Especially for the Muslim persons, they get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to pray.... So after that I cannot sleep, cannot think properly and in the end they have no human rights here.”

The Perth centre is located at the airport. It is described as a medium security facility, designed like a police lockup, utilised for overnight and short-term detention. It has a tiny exercise yard and no grassed areas. The report describes it as very unpleasant in the hot summer months.

HREOC received complaints on behalf of detainees who had been held at the Perth centre for four or five years. One letter described what had happened to a Chinese refugee held in Perth from August 1992 to November 1997: “The long term jailing has made (him) mad sometimes. Once he used a stick to break many windows in the detention centre.”

Protests were lodged by a Liberian refugee and an 18-year-old Iraqi youth detained in Perth. The Liberian said he had been held from April 22 to May 26, 1997. He described the centre as a gaol and asked for assistance, indicating he had contemplated suicide by hanging. The Iraqi protested about the use of surveillance cameras and the lack of a park in which to sit.

These barbaric conditions are maintained deliberately in order to deter refugees from seeking asylum in Australia. People are locked up in concentration camps with no legal rights and then deported in order to send a message abroad. As overcrowding increases at Port Hedland, these conditions are becoming more repressive.

At present, this policy is applied to unwanted refugees—designated as “unlawful non-citizens”. But as economic and social inequality grows, it can be extended to other vulnerable layers of society.



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