

Refugees held incommunicado in Australia, then violently deported

Regina Lohr
15 May 2000

Some recent comments from refugees and detention centre staff, given rare media coverage, have provided a glimpse of the cruel measures that the Howard government in Australia is using in both detaining and forcibly deporting asylum-seekers.

Staff members at the Woomera Detention Centre, located in South Australia's desert region, have revealed that authorities have been holding detainees incommunicado for months, refusing to allow them to contact their anxious families.

In addition, the 1,434 asylum-seekers held in the crowded facility, mainly from Afghanistan and Iraq, were given no indication of how long they were to remain incarcerated. They were understandably worried that their relatives had no idea whether they were dead or alive, given that most inmates had undertaken a perilous boat journey from Indonesia to reach Australia.

"The worst thing here is that they have lost all humanity," one Iraqi refugee wrote in a letter to a friend. "I have become inhuman like them [the guards] and have lost all hope.... This is the worst thing that's happened to me in all my life."

Woomera staff members reported that the detainees were so desperate that some had threatened suicide, and staff members had spent their own money to get messages to relatives.

According to Sarah Pritchard, a Sydney barrister and legal academic, the "incommunicado detention of unauthorised arrivals at Woomera is in violation of article 10 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights".

Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees lawyer George Lombard said the conditions at Woomera were a "clear and grievous" breach of both the Covenant and the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees.

Recently refugees from Afghanistan staged a hunger

strike in protest against their treatment. The arrest of a religious leader at the Woomera camp sparked further demonstrations. Two detainees escaped after a fence was pushed over during a demonstration. They were recaptured 170km away in Port Augusta and moved to Port Hedland Detention Centre. Those suspected of leading the protests were also punished by being moved elsewhere.

All six of Australia's immigration detention centres are run by a private firm Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), a subsidiary of Wackenhut, an American multinational. In addition, ACM runs a number of jails on Australia's east coast.

The Howard government has also hired private security firms to carry out the physical deportations of refugees. Every year the government deports several thousand asylum-seekers who have entered the country without permission.

Interviews with deported asylum-seekers have never appeared before in the media, and after seeing the recent ABC TV *Four Corners* program "A Well Founded Fear of Persecution" it is easy to understand why.

Two Algerian men interviewed after being deported to South Africa gave harrowing accounts of their treatment, describing how they were bound and gagged and repeatedly injected with sedatives during their deportation.

The men had gone on hunger strike at the Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney last year when their applications for asylum were rejected. They believed that the decisions were inconsistent with others, and that they were being victimised for having spoken out at the detention centre.

In October 1999 they were taken to the Arthur Gowrie Remand Centre, a jail in Brisbane, and from

there to the Princess Alexandra Hospital Security Unit to be force-fed. Medical staff persuaded them to end their hunger strike two weeks later on the understanding that their cases would be reviewed.

On January 24, however, one of the men was advised of his imminent deportation. His objections were met with an immediate injection of sedatives.

He was handed over to a private South African firm, P & I Associates, and swiftly given a further injection, followed by two more on the plane when he started shouting and calling out for help. One of the passengers told the guards that it was inhuman to treat people that way.

When the plane stopped in Perth he started shouting again. The security guards were about to give him a fifth injection. "When I saw the needle I thought that my heart would stop. So I told them I will not take the needle and I will be quiet."

Two days later the second man was told he was to be deported. He was taken to a room where ACM guards said he would be given an injection. When he objected that he was a Muslim and wanted to be fully conscious, five guards threw him to the ground and injected him by force. One of the guards' knees left a bruise on his face.

Afterwards on the plane his handcuffs were removed but plastic cord was tied around his feet and his hands, which were then tied to his waist. Guards covered his mouth with tape.

When the second man was to be deported, legal representatives, Amnesty International and the United Nations Committee Against Torture attempted to intervene. Dr. Heinz Schurmann-Zeggall of Amnesty International in London made a personal but unsuccessful phone call to Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock.

In South Africa the man cut himself with a knife and broken glass in a desperate bid to prevent his deportation to Algeria.

Asked about the use of sedatives, Ruddock claimed that injections were needed to "ensure that they don't endanger their own lives".

The reality is that refugees will resist removal precisely because they are being sent back to countries where they fear for their lives. Moreover, a number of asylum-seekers in Britain, Belgium and Austria have suffocated and died in recent years after being bound

and gagged during deportation.

Ruddock has called for the tightening of the UN Convention on Refugees, claiming that it is being more widely interpreted than originally intended. Ruddock asserted that the Convention is "easily manipulated" by people who are not "genuine refugees" but seeking relief from domestic situations and civil war.

Under the existing Convention, those fleeing from famine, hunger, natural disasters, plagues, economic exploitation and war do not qualify for refugee status. They have to prove fear of death or persecution on political, religious or ethnic grounds. Ruddock and the government are intent on cutting off even those lines of escaping oppression.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact