

Police attack asylum seekers with water cannons and tear gas in Australian prison camp

Linda Tenenbaum
4 September 2000

The Australian government's inhuman treatment of refugees escalated to a new level last Monday when 50 police and 250 security guards, wielding batons, riot helmets and shields, bombarded defenceless immigrants with water cannons and tear gas. The confrontation took place at the Woomera Detention Centre, a prison camp for asylum seekers, situated in the heart of the Australian desert, hundreds of miles from the nearest city.

About 80 of the detention centre's 780 inmates began protesting several days earlier when prison guards started constructing a new barbed wire fence to augment the already-existing perimeter fence, provocatively putting razor wire between the two. Each night, the protesters would pull the fence down, only to see construction resume the next day.

As anger mounted, police reinforcements were rushed in from the South Australian capital, Adelaide, nearly 500 kilometres away. By Saturday night the protesters had uprooted the security fence and set alight six flimsy corrugated iron buildings. They were fired on repeatedly with tear gas and water cannon. But news of the conflict only came out on Monday.

The road into the detention centre was cut off by a police blockade and all journalists prohibited from going anywhere near the facility. Describing the events as they unfolded on Monday morning, a local eyewitness, petrol station owner David Kirby said the refugees had made a "few holes in the outer perimeter fence." The police "plugged those with razor wire. And the APS [Australian Protective Services] in their riot gear are standing round them, and the detainees are trying to pull the razor wire through the holes." The police, he said, "keep re-plugging the holes and using

the water canons to wash [the refugees] away."

Kirby, who was standing on the roof of his petrol station about 200 metres away, said the water "just washes them away like rag dolls... it blows them away from the fence." He said there were about a hundred detainees involved in maintaining a "wanting to get out vigil".

The decision to authorise the mobile water canons, the first ever used in Australia, was made by a private company, Australian Correctional Management (ACM), using powers delegated to it by the government under the Migration Act. ACM is contracted to run all of Australia's migrant detention centres. It had placed the two specially converted fire engines on standby at the prison camp since June, when about 500 inmates staged a mass walkout.

Most of the protesters were young men from Iraq and Afghanistan, who, along with some 4,000 other refugees have been jailed under the Australian government's mandatory detention policy in the past year. Since 1994, when the policy was introduced by the Labor government, any asylum-seeker arriving in the country by boat, or without proper documentation, is automatically imprisoned. Many, including several hundred children, have remained in detention centres for years, awaiting a decision on their status.

According to reports, the 80 protesters have been at Woomera, reputedly the most inhospitable of all the government's detention centres, since it opened in November last year. Tensions have been simmering since the breakout in June, when inmates marched out of the compound into the local town to publicise their grievances. They were followed by hundreds of other detainees at remote centres in Curtin and Port Hedland.

While some of the refugees have since been released from detention on temporary visas, the 80 involved in last week's "riot" were reportedly recently informed that their applications for refugee status had been denied.

Journalist Peter Mares, the author of an upcoming book on asylum seekers in Australia, told ABC radio's *The World Today* that the incident revealed the "incredible pressure cooker environment" and the "level of frustration in the camp".

"While people may be rejected as refugees, that doesn't mean that they're not afraid of going home to their own countries," he said.

"They've probably paid thousands of dollars to try to get to Australia. They may have been misled by the people smugglers along the way." After being in detention at Woomera for months, Mares explained that the refugees would have had "very little opportunity to contact people outside the detention centre, very little understanding of the process they're actually involved in, of what is actually happening to them through this whole procedure."

Since Monday several recently-released detainees have spoken out, condemning conditions at Woomera as "terrible" and pointing out that the events were inevitable. One Kuwaiti refugee said life in a detention centre was worse than in the Middle East. "It's harder in this country," he said. "You don't have any rights. You're treated like an animal."

Twenty-six detainees have been removed from the prison camp and are being held in the Adelaide Remand Centre in South Australia. Five have already been charged with criminal offences. This follows the conviction of some of the refugees involved in the June breakout on the grounds of escaping from lawful custody. Many of them, now serving up to 11 months in jail, had virtually no access to legal advice and no legal representation.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock made a point of endorsing the police violence, accusing the asylum seekers of ingratitude and warning that the government would use the full force of the law against them. He insisted that "if the law is inadequate" it would be "addressed."

The Labor party's immigration spokesman Con Sciacca underscored his party's support for the government's stance. "If [the minister] hasn't got the

power to deport this rogue element very quickly, well he can ask us and we will give him whatever means he needs on a bipartisan basis to do just that." These people had proven, he proclaimed, that they were "not fit to stay".

On Tuesday, buoyed by support from the Labor Party and the media for its anti-refugee rhetoric, the government announced it would withdraw from certain UN human rights committees, and seek the reform of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Calling for a narrower definition of the term "refugee", Ruddock announced that Australia would henceforward reject "unwarranted requests" from United Nations committees to delay the removal of unsuccessful applicants.

"We need to arrest the trend which has led to some pressure groups and organisations seeking to extend the scope of the convention [the 1951 UN Refugees Convention] in ways which countries did not envisage when they signed," Ruddock declared.

The minister also telephoned the Refugee Council of Australia to voice his "dissatisfaction" with its position on mandatory detention. In June, the Council released a statement attacking the policy as a breach of international obligations and pointing to criticisms made of it by the UN Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International and other human rights bodies.

Ruddock accused the RCA of encouraging the violence and protests and of "peddling myths" about the state of detention centres. He went on to threaten to withdraw the Council's government funding.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact