

New evidence of brutality inside Australia's refugee camps

Jake Skeers

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Reports are continuing to emerge of the brutal treatment of refugees, including children, inside Australia's immigration detention centres, despite denials and cover-ups directed by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock.

New accounts given to journalists and humanitarian agencies indicate that children have been placed in leg restraints, deprived of medical care, disallowed food and placed in isolation cells. Asylum-seekers have been sexually and verbally assaulted while being deported, traumatised detainees have been locked up instead of receiving psychiatric attention and authorities have not reported the sexual assault of a 15-year-old boy.

These accounts, labelled "the tip of the iceberg" by Amnesty International, follow reports of the rape of a 12-year-old boy and a staff member at the Woomera detention camp, located in harsh desert in central Australia. Over the past two weeks, abuse has been reported in all six of the country's detention centres—at Woomera, Port Hedland and Curtin (both in the remote north-east), Villawood (Sydney), Maribyrnong (Melbourne) and Perth.

Some of the most serious reports include the following:

* Amnesty said a three-year-old boy had been placed in leg restraints at Woomera, and later kept with his father in a suicide-proof cell without windows, toilet or a shower for 13 days. Another four-year-old girl at Maribyrnong had a broken wrist for two weeks before being taken to hospital.

* According to an Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio report, three children were deprived of food for 32 hours while being transferred from Villawood across the continent to the Port Hedland. The parents asked staff to save food for the sleeping children, but were refused and the children were forced to go hungry.

* ABC radio said a 15-year-old boy, repeatedly sexually assaulted by an older man at Woomera, was so traumatised that he burned holes in himself. Barbara Regalla, a former nurse at Woomera, said the case was reported to police only after several complaints. Management banned the nurse, in whom the boy had confided, from accompanying him to the police interview. Regalla said this may have contributed to the boy's failure to divulge the information to the police.

* A 14-year-old Iraqi boy is in a Perth children's hospital after allegedly suffering psychological disorders during a year-long detention at Port Hedland. His family said the imprisonment had badly affected him, to the point that he had locked himself in a room, refused to eat for three days and threatened to harm himself,

causing officers to break down the door. Earlier he, his father and two brothers had been held for several days in individual cells.

In some instances, detainees have been severely punished for complaining or protesting about the conditions inside the camps. The ABC's *7:30 Report* reported that Kadhém El-Helo, a 39-year-old jeweller from Iraq, was locked up with 23 other men and his 10-year-old daughter Maysaa, after complaining about conditions at Woomera. They were denied food for the first three days. El-Helo fed his daughter biscuits and sugar. Maysaa watched her father being beaten with sticks by Australian Correctional Management (ACM) staff, in retaliation for breakouts by inmates in another section of Woomera. Maysaa suffers from anxiety and nightmares because of the incident.

There are many signs of unrest in the camps. At Port Hedland, authorities have admitted extinguishing a series of fires in the past month; all thought to have been deliberately lit by inmates in protest at their conditions. Last month two detainees scaled electric poles more than 15 metres high and threatened to jump. Later, two escaped after cutting their way through a perimeter fence.

Media reports have tended to focus on the role of ACM, a US-owned prison management company that the Howard government has hired to run the detention centres. Under its contracts, ACM financially benefits by cutting costs and covering up disruptive incidents, for which it can be penalised.

But the abuses of human rights flow directly from the policy of mandatory detention for illegal entrants adopted by successive governments, both conservative and Labor Party, over the past 15 years. Minister Ruddock has repeatedly defended ACM and the conditions in the camps on the explicit grounds that refugees must be deterred from trying to enter the country without permission.

In other incidents reported to the media:

* An intellectually disabled detainee and other men in need of psychiatric care were locked up in police cells at Woomera. "The police cells consisted of a concrete yard concealed behind brick walls. There was a small sheltered area (in which) to sleep and the place was infected with cockroaches," a nurse said. One inmate, grieving the loss of his wife and daughter, attempted to commit suicide and was subsequently locked up.

* ACM staff sexually assaulted and verbally abused several Chinese women who were being deported. In all, 85 people were escorted from Port Hedland to China by 35 to 40 ACM staff. According to an internal report, a senior staff member placed his hands on the breasts of several women and pushed a woman

forward “with his hands upon her buttocks”. ACM management told the author of the report that, “it won’t be going anywhere.”

* A medical doctor, Munjed Al Muderis, who now works at Mildura Base Hospital in Victoria, said he saw regular beatings of detainees by staff. He was also shocked by the medical conditions at Curtin. For several months a doctor was available only once a week for 1,200 people. Muderis had had to treat a patient to stop him bleeding to death.

* Other detainees at Curtin told ABC TV of a culture of verbal abuse. Staff regularly called them “terrorist motherf*****, Middle Eastern motherf***** and Muslim motherf*****”.

A lawyer and a psychologist have joined a number of former detention centre nurses who have spoken out to condemn the treatment of detainees. Laurie Levy, a barrister who worked with refugees told ABC TV: “I have acted for somewhere in the vicinity of 27 and 28 detainees at various times and the one thing I’ve heard consistently is the allegations of brutality perpetrated against detainees.”

Kieran Riordan, a former psychologist at Woomera and Curtin, condemned the lack of facilities, such as a safe observation room for psychiatric emergencies and a counselling room. “We had to sit outside with a couple of chairs in the dust,” he told the *Melbourne Age*. At Woomera there were no trees, no grass, and no sporting facilities. “It’s more like a PoW camp.”

Riordan accused officials of denying detainees translations of legal documents and said he understood recent protests by detainees, including a mass breakout at Woomera in August. “The detainees had been taken to their limit. These people are actually very ordinary, very like us. They behaved in exactly the same way we would have in their circumstances.”

The more evidence that has come forward, however, the more Ruddock has endeavoured to discredit those speaking out. This week he hailed a finding by the South Australian Human Services department that the initial allegation of sexual abuse of a boy at Woomera could not be substantiated. The finding was extremely limited. After closed-door interviews with the boy and his father, officials merely concluded that the incident could not be proven and made no comment on the wider evidence.

Nevertheless, Ruddock immediately labelled all the evidence as “wild and sweeping allegations” and declared: “I won’t be giving further credence to allegations that have been seriously flawed... There’s no evidence to support the allegations.” He accused individuals and agencies of raising instances of abuse in order to undermine the government’s immigration policy.

Former Woomera nurse Marion Guyett, and the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission stood by their reports. They questioned the worth of any internal departmental inquiry and renewed their calls for a judicial inquiry.

Ruddock has further sought to whitewash the situation by setting up his own investigation, which is confined to examining detention centre reporting processes. A number of former camp nurses have refused to give evidence to such an inquiry.

Sections of the media, business and political establishment have been increasingly vocal in criticising Ruddock and the government’s policy. Former Liberal Party prime minister Malcolm Fraser has accused the government of taking an

inflexible stance. He called the Woomera detention centre a “hell hole” and called for it to be shut down. “They (illegal immigrants) ought to be detained, but they ought to be detained properly,” he said.

Others have gone further, urging the government to modify its compulsory detention program by releasing women and children under supervision or to abandon the policy altogether. Media outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch have been prominent in this campaign. A recent *Australian* editorial stated: “Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock and his department have acquired a reputation for the pursuit of rigidity as an end in itself. Quite apart from the inhumanity of it, such rigidity is contrary to an enlightened view of the national interest.”

This reference to national interest points to underlying concerns that the government’s repressive approach is harming the country’s image, particularly in key Asian markets and in the near region, where Australian troops have been deployed in East Timor, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands in the name of upholding human rights and democratic values.

Some major employers are advocating a more open-door immigration and refugee policy in order to obtain new sources of labour, particularly in technology industries. These views were put somewhat crudely this week by prominent businessman Stan Wallis, chairman of retailing giant Coles Myer, insurance conglomerate AMP and the Amcor paper and packaging group. “You do need to make it easier for people to come out here, whether they come from North America or India,” he told the *Age*. “In Silicon Valley, they let hundreds of Indians come in to work without any obstacles, without any restrictions, with open arms. In this country? Try it.”

Under such pressure, Ruddock has indicated that women and children may be transferred to residential accommodation sometime in the New Year while they await the outcomes of their applications for refugee status. Nevertheless, the Howard government remains absolutely committed to its anti-refugee policy. Much of its electoral base depends upon channelling the discontent of rural and regional voters in a right-wing xenophobic direction. Howard has underscored his backing for Ruddock in a ministerial reshuffle this week, adding Aboriginal Affairs to Ruddock’s cabinet portfolio.



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