

Nurses expose cover-up

Sexual and physical abuse in Australia's refugee detention camps

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Nurses and other former staff members have begun to break through the Australian government's coverup of the conditions imposed on asylum seekers in the country's immigration detention camps. People who have worked in the remote facilities have spoken out in the past week, in defiance of their employment contracts.

Nurses have reported the rape of a 12-year-old boy at the Woomera camp, the suspected prostitution of the boy, as well as several young women, and other sexual and physical abuse. Staff have accused the private contractor running the camps, Australian Correctional Management (ACM), of not allowing them to report serious incidents to the police, forcing them to change medical reports and tampering with incriminating documents.

Over the past fortnight, more than 50 detainees at Woomera have been on hunger strike, protesting the inhuman conditions, the time taken to process their claims for refugee status, and the rejection of their applications. Fifteen detainees called off a 12-day hunger strike on November 30.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock has admitted that 11 hunger strikers were handcuffed and restrained while drips were put in their arms to force them to take in fluids. Ruddock defended the practice, not even permitted in prisons, by saying that the previous Labor government introduced legislation in 1992 to allow detainees to be restrained.

According to human rights groups, Australia is the only country in the world that compulsorily detains all asylum seekers indefinitely. It has six detention centres holding up to 3,000 prisoners at any time. The largest camp, Woomera, is in a central desert region where summer temperatures reach 45 degrees Celsius. It is hundreds of kilometres away from support groups and services, as are the other two big camps, Derby and Port Hedland, in Australia's isolated far north-west.

Refugees have managed to escape war-torn and repressive countries such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia and Turkey, often risking their lives in unseaworthy boats, only to be herded into hellholes in searing heat. Once incarcerated, detainees are deliberately dehumanised—they are each assigned a number, officially addressed only by this number and required to wear it at all times. They are assembled via loudspeakers several times a day. As one of the workers at Woomera told the media: "It is not like a concentration camp. It is a concentration camp."

There is now evidence that these conditions have, not unexpectedly, led to abuse. A nurse told ABC radio: "I was working as a Registered Nurse when I was at Woomera and it was quite an open secret among people, among detainees, among staff, that children were being sexually abused and some children were being physically abused... Generally when sexual abuse was occurring, management went out of their way to make sure the people did not speak about it or that outside agencies were involved."

Another nurse said management pressured a female staff member not to act on serious allegations of the rape of a 12-year-old boy within Woomera. "She did not know what to do when the child was brought into the centre traumatised, and I told her that she had to report it [to the authorities]. She was about to do that when the Centre Manager came into the room and persuaded her not to call." On the Centre Manager's advice, the nurse's report was torn up and another report was written, which did not mention sexual abuse.

Marie Quinn was the senior nurse on duty during the March 17 incident when the 12-year-old was brought into the centre's clinic by guards who suspected his father had raped him. She said she had blown the whistle on conditions in Woomera because "I want something done about the child who was sexually exploited, and because mandatory reporting did not take place ... and because there was a cover-up and so it can't happen again."

She first became alarmed because the camp's health service coordinator and seven of the 12 nurses were not registered to nurse and handle drugs in the state of South Australia. During her 24 weeks at Woomera, Quinn became "pretty horrified" by the condition of arriving asylum seekers. "They looked absolutely forlorn and lost. They were sick, the children were ill and they'd had a horrific journey across in an old boat." She commented that they were treated "worse than animals because animals have the best of care".

Quinn also confirmed that an ACM guard, who was still employed at the centre, had raped one of the camp's nurses. The victim had decided not to press charges and left ACM's employment soon afterwards.

Under the terms of ACM's contracts with the government to run the detention centres, the company can be penalised up to \$20,000 for certain criminal or disruptive incidents, giving it an incentive to

suppress unfavourable reports. A number of staff have reported the removal of and tampering with files. One nurse stated: “I was told that the files of all the people who in the past were implicated with sexual abuse—like people they suspected may have been sexually abused—had been removed.”

ACM's parent company is Florida-based Wackenhut Corporation, which has annual turnover of US\$2.2 billion. It runs 56 correctional institutions and detention centres, including four Australian gaols. In February this year the US Justice Department accused Wackenhut guards at a Juvenile Detention Centre in Louisiana of violating inmates' rights by habitually using excessive force and allowing fights over basic items like food and clothing.

The government is well aware of this record. A factor in its selection of ACM was sheer cost cutting. Detention costs have fallen from \$145 per detainee per day three years ago to \$112 today. Thus, ACM is directly profiting by depriving asylum-seekers of humane conditions and basic rights.

It is not just staff who are barred by confidentiality agreements from reporting on the conditions inside the camps. Migration agents allowed into the centres, some of whom are lawyers, must sign a strict undertaking not to discuss what they see. Any breach would place at risk the contracts they have with the Department of Immigration to interview the refugees and assist them to make their case for asylum.

Even greater pressure is applied to the inmates themselves. Farhad Nori, from the South Australian Council of Churches, said: “The problem is that the refugees are being put in a position that if they speak out they feel like their permanent residency would be in jeopardy as well.” Nori explained that refugees who spoke out were branded troublemakers and were often treated more harshly.

Mohammad Yasser, a former Afghani detainee, condemned the denial of fundamental rights in the Woomera camp. Not only were newspapers banned, but there was only one television set for the refugees, who numbered about 1,400 when he was there. It was turned off at news time and there was no access to radio news. A pay phone was recently installed, but calls were monitored and confined to family members. No contact with groups or individuals inside Australia was allowed.

Last month, in another bid to draw attention to their plight, detainees at the Port Hedland camp set fires in buildings. Refugees released from the camp have reported that inmates have been beaten with clubs, placed in isolation cells and verbally harassed and intimidated. Since mass protest breakouts at Port Hedland, Derby and Woomera earlier this year, the government has increased security and repression. Three layers of fencing, with razor and barbed wire, now surround Woomera.

The *WSWS* has previously reported that detainees are forcibly injected with drugs to render them unconscious during deportation. Further evidence suggests that such drugs are being used inside the camps as well. In October the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the use of excessive force and drugs to silence inmates against their will at the Villawood detention centre in Sydney.

One of the nurses who have spoken out has accused politicians on all sides of failing to act. She said she had written to Minister Ruddock, opposition leader Kim Beazley and Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett offering to substantiate a series of incidents. “Not

one of these people have written back to me,” she told *SBS Radio*.

Following the latest revelations, the Labor and Democrats leaders have criticised the government's handling of the issue. They do not oppose the underlying policy of mandatory detention, however. It was a Labor government that established the policy in the early 1990s and initiated measures, since extended by the Howard government, to cut off legal appeals against rejection of refugee status.

Church, refugee advocacy and human rights groups have urged the government to consider modifying the detention policy to allow women and children to be released into the community under supervision until their refugee applications are decided. Moreover, a United Nations working group on arbitrary detention has accused the government of effectively denying it permission to visit the detention centers for the past two years.

In effort to fend off the criticisms, the government has commissioned an extremely narrow and limited inquiry. After earlier denying the need for any investigation of the nurses' allegations, Ruddock has asked a former senior public servant to examine the “processes” for “identifying, dealing with, reporting on and following up allegations, instances, or situations where there is reasonable suspicion, of child abuse in immigration detention centres”. The inquiry will, therefore, investigate only procedures, not the substance of the allegations, let alone the wider evidence of human rights abuses or the underlying policy of detention.

Moreover, because it is not a judicial inquiry, Quinn and other nurses who provided the information will not be protected from retaliatory legal action by ACM. One of the nurses expressed their distrust: “Right now you have the same people handling the investigation. The last time when they were handling the investigations, they did not talk with the nurses concerned. They did not look at files. Certainly in the rape case, they did not even speak with the four officers concerned. And as far as I know, they did not speak with detainees.”

Even in announcing the inquiry, Ruddock emphasised that the government would not allow it to become a vehicle for any relaxation in “the integrity of Australia's border control”. He said asylum seekers had to be discouraged from entering the country illegally. In other words, the government is consciously relying upon the barbaric conditions in the camps to deter unwanted refugees from seeking asylum in Australia. Its inquiry will be a whitewash to ensure that the anti-refugee policy continues.



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