

# Australian asylum seekers protest death of fellow detainee

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Sixty-seven asylum seekers imprisoned in the Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre in Victoria staged a hunger strike on New Year's Day to protest the inhuman treatment of Viliami Tangino, a fellow inmate. Tangino, a 53-year-old Tongan who had lived in Australia for 17 years, committed suicide on December 22.

Outside the centre, about a hundred demonstrators from refugee support organisations, churches and political groups honoured Tangino's memory, chanting "Free the refugees!" as the refugees called out in response "We want freedom!" from behind the three metre high walls.

Tangino died at Maribyrnong after throwing himself head first from the top of a basketball pole in the centre's yard. He had climbed the pole early in the day to protest his imminent deportation. According to eye-witness reports from fellow detainees, prison officials taunted the desperate and distraught man throughout his eight-hour ordeal, with one guard shooting balls at the hoop, aiming at Tangino as his target.

The other detainees were prevented from coming to Tangino's aid. A Tongan inmate tried to intercede and translate for his friend: "He told me that he needed a smoke and that was the last thing he said to me. I told [the officers] it's cold and he needed a smoke, but I signalled to him I couldn't give him a smoke."

After Tangino came crashing down, the detainees reportedly had to break through a doorway to get to the badly injured man. A Sri Lankan inmate Suranga Tennakoon told the media by phone: "I ran to him. There was a blood pool. From the nose and ears the blood is pumping. Nobody can forget that. I rubbed his hand. They called me to come and help him and feeling his pulse, and I spoke to him very nicely. He passed away in my hands."

Following Tangino's death, agitated inmates were reportedly rounded up by dozens of police sent into the centre, aided by private riot police working with the prison management, Australian Correctional Management. Suranga Tennakoon said that he, his brother and a Syrian prisoner, who had previously tried to commit suicide with a razor,

were locked under special confinement for six days, during which they were fed only one meal and half a cup of water a day. Tennakoon told the media: "(A guard) grabbed my T-shirt and hit me into the wall very hard. I said 'Please don't hurt me or my brother'."

In Tonga, the dead man's family was waiting at the International Airport for their father to arrive, unaware of the ordeal he was undergoing and of his subsequent death.

Tangino's son, Antonio, explained that he had joined his father in Sydney, where Viliami had worked for years in factories around Marrickville to support his family in Tonga. He and his father had been arrested in August while fruit picking near Swan Hill, a rural town in the north of Victoria, and detained at Maribyrnong. "The people who work in there, they treat us like animals," he declared, adding that the inmates were never given enough food.

Explaining his father's reaction to the government's decision to deport him back to Tonga, Antonio said: "Maybe he looked to the future. If he came back to Tonga he has seven kids. If he came back here, how can he have enough money to look after them? He worked there (in Australia) so he could send money back."

Maribyrnong Detention Centre houses some 80 inmates, among them, at present, nine children, including an 18-month-old Somali boy, who was born there and has been diagnosed with haemophilia.

Like the larger centres in Western Australia, South Australia and NSW, Maribyrnong has increasingly been the subject of disturbing reports. At the end of 1997, the Australian Department of Immigration (DIMA) began contracting out the running of all its immigrant detention centres to a private company, Australian Correctional Management (ACM) run by US prison management company Wackenhut. Over the past months revelations from inmates and their supporters have exposed the systematic use of violence and intimidation in the centres.

Last October the ABC television program *Four Corners* interviewed two psychologists who secretly conducted a survey of Maribyrnong inmates. Maritza Thompson, who

treated Tamil detainees at Maribyrnong for torture-induced trauma incurred in Sri Lanka, has been denied access since ACM took over the centre's management two years ago. The other psychologist, Patrick McGorry of Melbourne University, complained to the program that detention centre staff are untrained in trauma counselling and persistently misinterpret the behaviour of refugees as a result. He added that even those asylum seekers who have suffered multiple tortures have to endure, on average, a two-year wait in the centre for their claims ultimately to be upheld. He said the indefinite waiting periods magnify stress levels at least four-fold.

Maribyrnong operates under the amended Migration Act of 1958. The Human Rights Commission, in its last official scrutiny at the end of 1998, published many complaints made by Maribyrnong detainees. There were only four toilets and four showers for more than 60 men and little privacy. Medical staff did not use interpreters during consultations. One detainee with medical training complained that he had been prescribed an unsuitable drug: "The doctor prescribed the same drug for all seven people who saw him that day." There is one public phone for female detainees and two outgoing and one incoming phone for male inmates. Mobile phones and Internet access are banned.

ACM's High Risk Assessment Team (much praised by the Human Rights Commission) either failed to predict the possible consequences of Viliami Tangino's desperation or to respond to it satisfactorily or both. The company contacted no outside agencies for support during the entire eight-hour period. Furthermore, its response in the aftermath of the tragedy has been to gag or discredit the reputation of those who have attempted to speak out.

Tahir Cambis, an independent filmmaker currently making a documentary about the obstacles faced by Australians who try to assist asylum seekers, has been banned entry to Maribyrnong after statements he made to the media in the aftermath of Tangino's death. Cambis spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"Last week Kosovar friends rang me and told me that a man had died in Maribyrnong. I have Iranian, Iraqi and Fijian friends in there but because of my statements to the media, I have now been banned from entry. I have spoken to an Immigration lawyer in Canberra, and neither DIMA nor ACM have the legal right to intrude on people's friendships. But what they do is snow you with bureaucracy.

"It is a major concern that due process has not been followed. After he died, Viliami Tangino was lying there for half an hour before an ambulance arrived. It was actually the detainees who rushed to call ambulance, police, emergency services. The phone lines immediately then went

dead. ACM do have a vested interest in there being no reports of disturbances.

"So it was eight and half hours after he had climbed up the pole before the ambulance arrived. The police arrived two hours later, supposedly to 'quell a riot,' not to investigate the death. What police carried out was a joint exercise with ACM staff. The 'riot' consisted of one or two mattresses being set alight in despair. Several detainees tried to give evidence to the police, but nothing happened. I've seen the police records of interview from North Altona Police station. They only took evidence from ACM guards.

"Three witnesses were put in isolation for six days. They were interviewed by Footscray Police, but only when ACM laid charges of threats being made against the staff. These 'threats' were an emotional reaction by someone who'd just seen a man dying in his arms. This is simply a witness being discredited by staff. I've read this record of interview as well, and it was not possible for the police to clearly question the 'threats.' The major issue of the interview had to be Tangino's death.

"In every crucial element the record of interview [with the eye-witness to Tangino's death] matched what I'd heard from other detainees, everything coincided. The stories were so consistent, yet he'd been in isolation. That was what was chilling about the record of interview—it matched exactly all the statements I'd heard. Maybe they were tapping to each other with Morse code on the walls!

"From the day after Tangino died I was there—not as a filmmaker, but as a support person. I've seen the counsellor there, and the nurse there and the guards who were present. I never saw the slightest air of sadness in these people. A week before, the ACM flag was flying at half-mast because a nurse had sadly died of cancer. But no flag was at half-mast for Viliami Tangino when he died—because a detainee doesn't count for anything.

"Maribyrnong is a grey walled prison. Try to imagine waking to a grey walled prison in grey surroundings, having to eat grey food. And you're not a criminal. You might be a three-year-old child, being punished for simply being in need. ACM is a prison management. They run all the Immigration prisons—and there are secret points in their contract. They spend a certain amount per head per day—but that is different from what they get from the government. It's much less. That's their profit."



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